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MIKE SHAYNE



OCTOBER, 1971
VOL. 29, NO.5

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE LANDLORD MURDER CASE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Beautiful they were, made for a good man's love, yet evil was with them always, the two girls who held one deadly key to a murdered man's gold. Could Mike Shayne find an answer to the riddle of a house which sold death—and a man who had died twice in one night?

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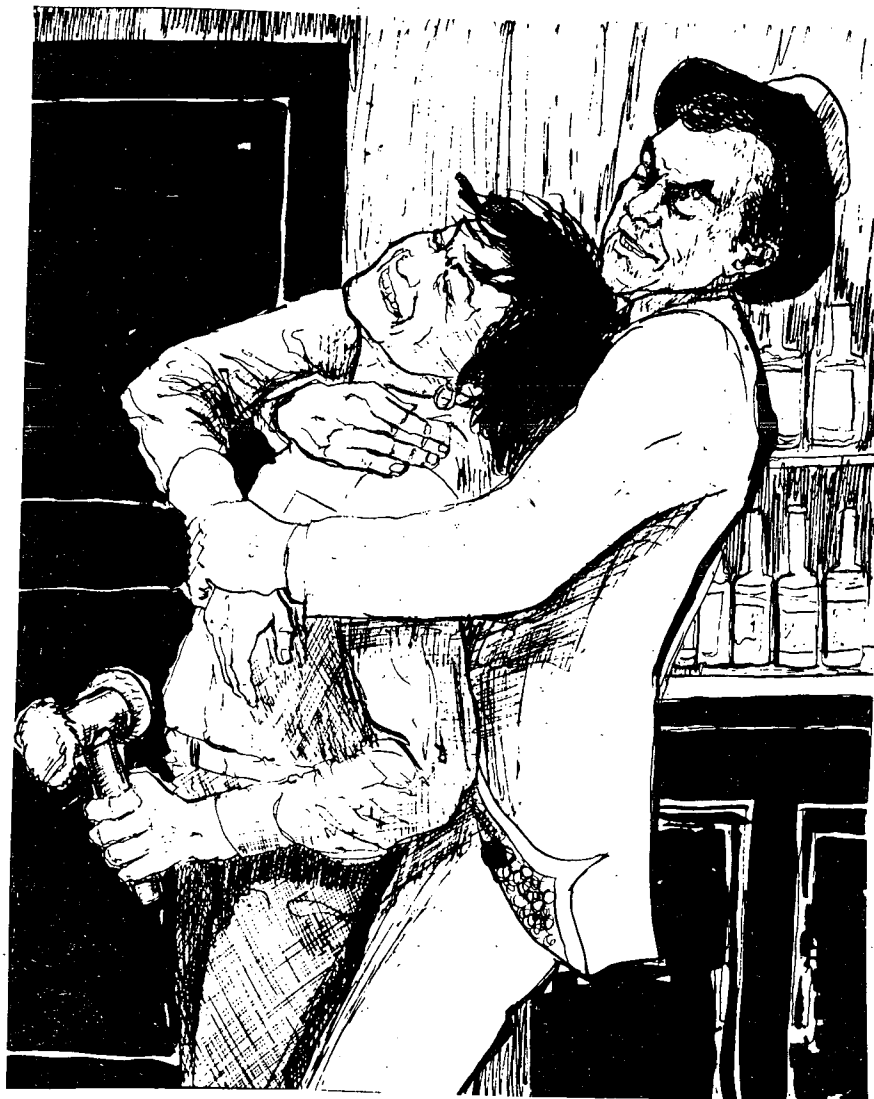
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A NEW, COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



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THE LANDLORD MURDER CASE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Predatory, evil, they prowled the Miami night, two girls with the deadly key to a stolen fortune. Could Mike Shayne break the case of the house which sold only death—and the man who had been murdered twice?



SUMMER HEAT LAY like a blanket over downtown Miami, Florida, but it didn't keep the crowds of tourists off the main stem. The sidewalks around the junction of Flagler Street and Miami Avenue were like streams flowing bank to bank except that they flowed with people instead of water.

There were rich South and Central Americans, Cuban exiles, families from Brooklyn and Rockaway and South Boston. There were Canadians, talking French of a sort and visibly appalled by the torrid

tropic heat. There were shoals and gaggles of vacationing school teachers from the midwest and north.

The local people moved more slowly to conserve energy in the overwhelming heat. If they were attorneys or professional or business men they carried briefcases and wore black or dark colored tropic weight suits as a sort of uniform by which they could recognize each other.

The man who turned into the lobby of one of the biggest banks fronting on Flagler Street was sup-

officially no different from the rest of this last group. His Palm Beach suit was black and conservatively cut. He wore a white shirt and a regimental stripe four-in-hand tie that was neither wide nor narrow. If his full head of carefully combed greying hair was in reality a toupee, it was a very good one. He carried the customary black attache case.

Only his eye-glasses were at all unusual. They were large, with octagon frames of a heavy, jet black composition. From even a short distance they were the most noticeable thing about his face—distorting certain features which a casual observer might otherwise have remembered.

Actually he was wearing a rather elaborate disguise, but it was so carefully and subtly planned that no one seeing him for the first time could have guessed the fact.

Once inside the bank, the man took his place in line at one of the teller's windows. When his turn came he took a check from his wallet and placed it in front of the teller.

It was really a check sized slip of paper on which the following words had been printed in block letters with a wide red pen:

Do not hesitate or show any alarm. Don't sound any signal or argue with me. Put all the paper money you have on the counter. DO AS I SAY.

The startled teller looked at the man in front of the window. He saw no weapon, and no threat had actu-

ally been made, but there was something about the grim lines of the mouth and the steely glint of the eyes that made up his mind. It was funny. Later on he could remember the menace in the eyes, but for the life of him he couldn't tell police what color they had been.

He put sheafs and stacks of currency on the counter, and the man outside deftly stacked it in his attache case.

When the last bills from the cash drawer had been packed away, the man in the black suit spoke for the first time.

"No alarm," he said in low, carefully un-accented tones. "I mean it."

He picked the note off the counter and pocketed it. Then he closed and fastened his case, turned away and melted into the crowd of people in the bank lobby.

It was a full minute before the teller snapped out of his state of near paralysis enough to put his foot on the alarm button under the counter.

By that time the man in black had vanished as if he'd gone up in a puff of smoke. Out on the Flagler Street sidewalks he was just one of hundreds like him.

When the police heard the teller's description: "Stout, maybe chunky, I don't know. Middle aged. White shirt. Glasses. Dark suit," they mentally threw up their hands in despair.

"Go arrest everybody in the court house hallways," one detective told

another. "Any one of them fits that description. Any one."

Five blocks away from the bank a medium height, balding man walked out of the washroom of the Greyhound Bus Company terminal. He wore grey wash-and-wear slacks and a blue short-sleeved shirt and black shoes and carried a paper shopping bag blazoned with the name of one of the big downtown department stores. He also carried a black attache case full of clothing and an expensive toupee, and he checked this through to Chicago under a meaningless name. Eventually it would be auctioned off with other unclaimed flotsam and jetsam of the bus line.

The shopping bag the man carried was heavy and bulging with contents discreetly wrapped in smaller brown paper bags. There was nothing unusual about it.

II

MELTON LEWIS, the bank vice president, told Detective Lieutenant Maine — right hand man of Miami Police Chief Will Gentry, "As near as we can figure, he had between thirty-five and forty thousand dollars in bills in that attache case when he walked out of here."

"That's a nice bundle. Enough to make sure he keeps going fast and far," the lieutenant said.

"You've got to stop him," the bank man said heatedly.

"I can assure you there's nothing

we'd like better," Maine said. "The trouble is this seems to be one smart cookie we're dealing with. For one thing he knew just when there'd be a lot of cash waiting for him at the window."

"That wouldn't mean he was so smart, lieutenant. On Friday mornings every bank in town puts out cash. Lots of small business men meet their payrolls Friday afternoon."

"For a second point," the unperturbed lieutenant went on, "this guy didn't show a gun. He didn't even threaten your teller. When we go to court, or the state's attorney does, what's the charge? It can't very well be armed robbery. More likely larceny by fraud is the most he can be hit with."

"I never thought of that," Melton Lewis said.

"I did," the lieutenant said. "So did the heist man. On top of that he didn't leave any more trail than a mackerel crossing the Bay. The description we have is meaningless."

"Did he think of everything?" The man from the bank looked appalled.

"We can only hope he didn't," the detective said.

In another part of the town, the man at the kitchen table said, "I thought of everything."

"Are you sure?" asked the other man seated across the table from him. "Are you really sure?"

"Of course I am," the first man said. He took a long swallow from the half-empty whiskey bottle on

the table between them. "Just look how easy it went. Thirty-eight thousand, seven hundred and ninety-three dollars and nobody's got any idea where it went. No clues, no trail. Nothing. I don't even have a worry and you don't either. I thought of everything."

"Not quite everything," the second man said. "You didn't think of quite everything."

"Sure I did. Sure I did. What did I miss?"

Then he saw the gun in the other's hand.

II

SATURDAY NIGHT in Miami was one of the hottest that Mike Shayne could remember. Not that there was any novelty about a summer Saturday being hot. The climate was tropical, and in summer a chicken wouldn't dare run across the street for fear of arriving on the other side already "southern fried, but still squawking." At least that's what the old-timers said around the town.

This particular Saturday was going to be some sort of a record-breaker though. Earlier in the day Shayne had watched a couple of carefree small-fry break an egg on a downtown sidewalk. In minutes it was nicely fried and brown around the edges.

Now at dusk the blanket of stale hot air over the city was almost tangible.

To make things worse Lucy Hamilton was out of town, and Shayne

was bored and at loose ends. He missed his confidential secretary and looked forward without enthusiasm to a long and muggy night.

Otherwise it was doubtful if he'd have given more than a casual glance to the Gladhand Bar, much less parked his car and gone in. The Gladhand wasn't the sort of place where Mike Shayne usually drank.

It was one of a hundred bars, grilles and lounges strung like inferior beads along the necklace that was North Miami Avenue from Thirty-sixth to Seventy-ninth Streets. The front had neon signs and had once had paint. The doorway was hooded for privacy and to hint of nameless delights inside. The lights were too dim—a tourist or a lush sometimes mistook a sawbuck for a single to the enrichment of the barmaids—and the air-conditioning too cool. When Shayne went in there were only a half-dozen patrons at the bar and nobody at all in the booths along the wall.

Mike Shayne sat down in one of the booths and ordered a beer. He was already sorry about coming in, but the air and the beer were cold and he was weary from a day of routine leg-work for the sake of an insurance company which kept him on a regular retainer. The big private detective had worked for them for years. Later on he'd go to a good restaurant for dinner, but this bar was a place to wait until the late afternoon traffic thinned out on

He finished the first beer. It was draught and a good brand. He relaxed a little and signaled the barmaid for a refill. It was only then that he noticed the blonde at the far end of the bar.

She was watching the big detective.

She wasn't exactly young or exactly beautiful either but she was a big blonde and that was a type the detective had always gone for. She was a tall woman, firm hipped and big breasted, with an oval face, a wide, generous red-lipped mouth and a mop of blonde hair. Most of all she was obviously interested in the big man in the booth.

Shayne was tired and bored and not particularly in the mood for adventure. He dropped his eyes and contemplated his beer with an interest he didn't feel. It didn't stop her from watching him.

After a moment she came over and stood by the side of the booth.

"I've seen you some place," she said positively.

Mike Shayne didn't look up. "It's possible," he said. "I get around."

"If I'm right about you, you sure do."

"Like I say, it's possible," Shayne said and drank some of his beer. He intended to finish it off and leave.

The woman sat down in the booth across from him. "Don't fret yourself, buster," she said. "I ain't trying to hustle you. Some other time



maybe but not tonight. Tonight I got troubles."

Shayne looked at her across the table. Here was no straying debutante, but she wasn't a tramp either. He decided to wait and see what she had to say. He just looked at her.

"Thanks," she said. "I mean for not giving me the old heave-ho. I really do have something I want to ask you about."

On an impulse Shayne signaled the barmaid to bring over two more beers. "Go ahead," he said, "but remember I may not know the answer."

"You're Mike Shayne, the private detective, aren't you?" she asked, ignoring her beer. "I've seen your picture in the *News* a few times. At least I think so."

"That's me."

"Good." She was obviously pleased she'd been right. "Mr. Shayne, I—"

"Just call me Mike. It's Saturday night."

"Okay then, Mike. Mike, I need help. I'm in a spot. It might not seem much to you, but I'm in a spot. A guy like you could help me out. You know about these things."

"Not till you tell me I don't," Shayne said. "Suppose you tell me who you are and what's wrong. Just for a change start at the beginning."

"You don't have to kid me," she said. "This is serious to me, Mike. It really is."

"I wasn't kidding," he said. "It's just that one of my biggest troubles is getting clients to tell me what's wrong. You wouldn't believe how people can keep off the subject without half trying. Like I was a Russian spy or something. Now who are you, and what's the trouble?"

She kept looking at him until she was sure he wasn't just being sarcastic. Then she smiled. It made her face almost pretty and awakened a stir of interest in the big man in the booth. Under the table one of her knees touched his. She didn't seem to notice.

"I'm Amy," she said. "Amy Malone. I live in the Pelican Cabins, a couple of blocks from here."

"I know where it is," Mike Shayne said.

He knew the area well. The Pelican called itself a motel, but actually it was a collection of fifteen or sixteen ancient, tumbledown frame cabins and cottages backed up to the railroad spur line on one side and a steam laundry plant on the other.

Once it had been out in the country and housed amorous couples and ladies of the night. The ramshackle building housing a bar on the front of the lot had one room devoted to gambling in the days when the county had been comparatively wide open.

In time the city had grown up to and surrounded the once-rural Pelican, and then decayed into slum or semi-slum on all sides.

The Pelican itself had gone through the hands of a succession of owners, each one slightly more disreputable than his immediate predecessor. Of late it housed drifters, casuals, welfare clients and the human detritus awash in the South Florida fringe areas.

"I know," Shayne said.

"It's my landlord. He won't let me stay and he won't let me take my things. I need my clothes, Mr. Shayne. I need my money."

Shayne sighed. This began to look like just another touch. "Why don't you pay him the rent?" he suggested, mentally figuring how much cash he would give to bail her out.

"It ain't that, Mike," she said and surprised him. "I'm not hustling you. I said so. The rent's paid to the end of the month. He just won't let me in the place."

"You got a rent receipt?"

"No," she said, "but I ain't lying to you. I had a receipt the first month, but after that — you know how it is."

Shayne knew. In a place like the

Pelican nobody stood on formalities.

"The last couple months my girl friend's been living with me. She ain't around or at least I didn't see her. I go back by there a while ago and there's a padlock on the door. Old man Moterman, the landlord, he wouldn't take it off. He said I owed rent. I know I don't."

"Why didn't you call the cops?" Shayne asked. He didn't really need to be told.

"Who, me? You crazy. I sing around at bars for a living. Odd jobs. Things. You know. The cops don't take my word against a landlord. Not once in a blue moon. No, he said he'd call the cops if I didn't get out."

"What about your girl friend?"

"He said she left early that day. That's funny too, Mike. Jean would never have been and gone without telling me. I owed her a sawbuck. Besides old Moterman has been making passes at her. He'd have let her stay as long as she'd climb into the feathers with him once in a while. That'd be rent enough. He's done it before with others."

"You think maybe that's it?" Shayne asked. "He just tosses you out so he and she can have the place to themselves."

"No," she said. "They wouldn't have minded me. Besides he ain't got a wife. He takes his women to his own room. I don't know what it is. I just don't understand."

"I probably can't make him let you stay there," Shayne said. "It

would take a lawyer and a court order to do that. Cost you more money than it's worth."

She realized he was going to help and smiled at him again. Her knee pressed his.

She said: "Don't worry. I don't care about that. I want my clothes. My costumes I dance in. I need my guitar to work. You help me get those is all I want."

"Finish your beer," Shayne said.

III

THE PELICAN CABINS MOTEL presented a dark and sullen front to the city even so early in the evening. The cabins were old and broken down with the roofing felt peeling off. Paint on siding and around doorways was only a vestige of what it once had been. The space between was hard-beaten dirt and the litter of years. Garbage cans spilled or overflowed into a tangle of rusted bed springs, paper milk cartons and old newspapers.

Lights burned inside some of the cabins, but they came from feeble, low-watt bulbs. Most of the tenants were gone for the evening in search of more cheerful surroundings. A drunk in a blue sport shirt nursed a quart of beer on the steps of one cabin.

The door of the somewhat larger building on the front of the lot bore a sign that said: *Office*. Mike Shayne knocked. His big fist hit the door

hard enough to rattle it on its ancient hinges.

There was no answer.

He knocked again. This time they could hear the sounds of someone moving about inside and a light was turned on.

"Who's there?" said an indistinct voice. "Whatcha want?"

"This is supposed to be a motel, isn't it?" Shayne said. "Open up. I want to talk to you."

The door cracked open and somebody looked out. He was as big a man as Shayne, but his back was to the light inside, and the detective couldn't make out his face.

"I have no vacancy," the man said. "Get off my property."

"He's got a vacancy," Amy said from behind Shayne.

The man in the building recognized her voice and tried to slam the door, but Mike Shayne got his foot in the crack first. Moterman tried to stomp on Shayne's toes. That was his big mistake.

The detective put his weight on the door with a great heave that forced it inward against the landlord's effort to hold it shut. There was a brass chain but it was a cheap one and the screws pulled out of the time-rotted door frame.

Moterman staggered back into the middle of the room as Shayne pushed in after him. He looked stupidly at the broken chain. Then he grabbed up a chair and swung it at Mike Shayne's head.

Shayne stepped in under the im-

provised club and slammed his fist into the landlord's solar plexus with enough power behind the blow to fell an ox.

Moterman's breath came out in a foul-smelling "whoosh." He staggered, went limp all over, and collapsed onto the worn carpet which covered the floor.

Mike Shayne walked over to a table against the wall and turned on the lamp which stood there. The light showed the landlord floundering on the floor like a newly landed fish.

He was a big man with a pocked face and a jaw blue with two days' beard stubble. He wore sleazy, permanent press slacks, much stained and spotted and an expensive sport shirt printed in a design of palm trees and surfers. The shirt was new and clean. He was barefooted.

His black eyes hated Shayne and the woman as he struggled to a sitting position. One hand slid toward the back of his slacks. Shayne sensed he was about to pull a knife from a hidden sheath and braced for the fight.

"Get out," the man said from a sitting position. That took all his wind and he coughed. "I'll call the cops."

"He's a detective," Amy said from over by the door.

Shayne was amazed by the effect of her words. They took all the fight out of the landlord. The hand which had been about to reach under his shirt fell away. Lids dropped

to hood the sullen black eyes, and he tried to twist his face out of the mask of fury it had been.

"He's afraid," Shayne told himself. "He shouldn't be. If everything was like he says, he'd be glad to see a cop here." He began to think there could be more to this whole matter than he had expected when he listened to Amy in the Gladhand Bar.

He decided to play the advantage Amy's statement had apparently given him for all it was worth.

"Get up," he said to Moterman. "Turn around and face the wall. Put your hands up over your head on the wall. Snap to it."

He frisked the man expertly. As he'd expected there was a fishknife with a razor-sharp four-inch blade in a leather sheath under the man's belt behind the right hip. He tossed the knife into a trash can in a corner of the room.

"Okay now," Shayne said. "This woman claims you've locked her out of her cabin. Tonight she's come to get her clothes and personal stuff. You're going to unlock for us right now."

"I can't," the man said.

"You do as I say," Shayne said. "If you're lucky she won't file charges against you. She can take you to court about the rent money she paid too. Right now she wants her clothes, and I was sent to see that she gets them." The man might as well go on thinking Shayne was from the regular Miami Police



"I said I can't," Moterman said. "Somebody else rented that place. He said he had to have it right away. So, since she was overdue with the rent—"

"You knew she was paid up," Shayne said. "You just figured you could toss her out on her can and she wouldn't dare blow the whistle on you."

"That's it," Amy Malone said. "That's exactly it."

"You were wrong," Shayne said. "I'm here to prove it. Now let's get a move on. Get the lead out."

He grabbed the landlord by the shoulder and shoved him out the front door. The man followed Amy very unwillingly. A couple of times Shayne thought he was going to try

fighting again, but each time he thought better of it. It was probably only his belief that the big redhead was a policeman that stopped him.

At the door of the last cabin in the south row he hung back again. Finally he took a ring of keys out of the pocket of his dirty slacks, but he still hesitated to use them.

"I tell you," he said. "This place is rented to a guy. He borrowed that padlock from me. I had to promise nobody'd go in here, not even me."

"Did you take out Miss Malone's personal effects?" Shayne demanded.

"No. No, I didn't. I didn't think she'd come back so quick. I can't go in there though till the tenant gets back. I'll get him to give me her stuff then. She can have it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow my foot," Amy said. "I want my stuff now."

"Tell you what," Moterman said. "You come back to the office. Maybe you do have a week's rent coming. I give you that now, and come back tomorrow for your clothes."

"Quit stalling," Mike Shayne said. "Unlock this shack and hurry up about it."

"I can't. I swear I can't."

"What you're trying to say is you won't," Amy said. "You will though. You do as Mr. Shayne says and hurry up about it."

"Shayne?" Moterman said, and stared at the big redhead. "Shayne? Now I know you. You ain't no fly-cop. You're that shamus from down-

town. Here, damn it. You want any door opened you do it yourself."

He threw the keys at Mike Shayne, spun on his heel and walked back past the dark cabins toward his own place.

"I'm sorry, Mike," Amy Malone said. "What do we do now?"

Mike Shayne stooped down and picked up the ring of keys from the dirt.

"You heard what the man said, Amy," he said casually. "He told me to go ahead and unlock if I wanted in. You can be my witness I had the landlord's permission."

"You mean—"

"I mean we'll go in right now and get your stuff," Shayne said. He tried keys in the lock until he got the right one and took the padlock off the door. Then he used the regular owner's pass key and they went into the cabin.

Amy turned on a light—about a fifteen-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling—and set about collecting clothing and odds and ends from the dresser and a curtained-off corner which did duty as a closet. Everything fitted easily into one big cardboard suitcase. She gave a last look around the room and pushed Shayne out the door.

The big detective turned around and walked back in for another look around.

"Hold on," he said. "There's something funny here. You take your stuff and the closet's empty

here. Didn't you say you had a girl friend living with you?"

"Yeah. Jean."

"Then where's her clothes? She must have had some. And what about this guy's supposed to have rented the cabin out from under you? Doesn't he move in even a suitcase?"

"I don't know," Amy said. "I don't care even. I got my stuff. So let's get out of here before Moterman comes back and gets nasty again."

"I think I'd better talk to Moterman some more," Mike Shayne said. "This whole thing is beginning to look mighty funny to me. What I see of it doesn't make sense."

"Oh hell, Mike. Why should we worry about that? I'm hungry. I been too worried to eat up to now."

It was a broad hint, and Shayne couldn't help smiling. Well, this whole thing was getting interesting. It would be worth the tab for a steak to find out more about it.

"Okay," he said, "so you're hungry. Go on and wait for me at the car then. There's a couple of things I have to ask that sour-faced old bum who runs this place. It won't take but a couple of minutes though. Then we can go get a good meal some place."

"All right," Amy said, "only just don't take too long. I'm really not kidding about being hungry."

Shayne walked back to the door marked: *Office*. This time it wasn't locked. As a matter of fact it wasn't

even completely closed but stood ajar about four inches. Shayne pushed it open and walked on in after a cursory knock.

Then he stopped in his tracks.

Moterman the landlord was there in the living room.

He was flat on his back on the worn and shabby carpet. His mouth was open and he was staring with sightless eyes up toward the light bulb on its cord. A knife had been driven into his heart from just under the rib cage. Its hilt cast a long, finger-like shadow across his chest.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE moved swiftly through the other rooms of the building with his hand close to the gun he wore in a belt holster under his jacket. There was no one there. The rear door was unlocked, but when the big man opened it, he could see no one moving between the rear of the house and the railroad track. He went back into the front room.

There was a phone on the old office desk where the landlord had kept his records. Mike Shayne called the Miami police. He was known to be a close friend of Chief Will Gentry, so the captain in charge of the duty shift took the call and listened intently.

"We'll get somebody out there right away, Mike," the officer said. "I'd appreciate your standing by until the first car comes."

"Sure," Shayne said. "Glad to help."

He left the room after that and walked out to where he'd parked his car, meaning to break the news to Amy Malone. To his very considerable surprise she wasn't waiting for him there. Neither was her suitcase inside the car, where it would have been logical for her to leave it.

Shayne looked up and down the street, but saw no sign of the woman. He considered making a quick tour of the neighborhood looking for her, but then discarded the notion. He needed to stay close enough to keep watch over the body of the murdered man. More than that she'd likely be back. She might have gone around the corner to get cigarettes or something.

But in that case why lug the suitcase along when it could have been put in the rear seat of the detective's car? He shrugged and went back to the house, but it bothered him that the woman had gone off like that.

The first prowler car was on the scene within five minutes from the time Shayne had called headquarters. Sergeant McGinnis, senior officer of the two in the car, was an old friend. He looked the body over.

"A bad business, Mike," he said, "but I can't say I'm surprised. This was a hard man in life, and his kind are like to die hard."

"You knew him?" Shayne asked.

"In the line of duty only," McGinnis told him. "He's run this place

for ten years now, though why anybody would bother with a broken-down dump like it I'd not know. There's times we've had our eyes on him, though never enough for a conviction. You know how it is with these types—a little pimping, selling moonshine after hours, maybe fencing stuff the area kids steal, a bit of brawling when in the drink."

"I know," Shayne said. He'd often encountered the type. "Only who would put a knife in his heart?"

"A fight maybe," the sergeant said. "This kind and his friends are not above using the knife in a bit of a quarrel."

"It wasn't that sort of thing," Shayne said. "I was in one of the back cabins when it happened. I was the last one to speak to him—except for the killer, of course. If there'd been a fight I'd have heard it. Sound carries in these neighborhoods."

"Murder one, you mean?" McGinnis said. "In that case I'd better send for some of the homicide folk. We'll need men to rouse out the rest of the tenants here and question them too."

He picked up the phone and called headquarters.

Captain Bill Ryan of Miami Homicide came out himself when he heard that Mike Shayne had found the body. With him came fingerprint and photo technicians, a man from the coroner's office to look at the body and plainclothes men to talk to the other tenants.

"Don't you ever go any place where there isn't a murder?" the captain asked Mike Shayne. "Pretty soon they'll be making you a patron saint for the morticians' union."

"I try," Shayne said. "I thought I was going to make it tonight too. Then this guy has to get himself bumped off right under my nose."

"Too bad it wasn't just a bit sooner so you could have seen who did it. By the way, where's this woman you say you were helping get her clothes? I'd like to talk to her."

"So would I," Shayne said. "I told her to wait at my car but I haven't seen her since."

"That's funny. Do you think—"

"No," Shayne said, "she couldn't have killed him. She was with me the whole time he was being killed. That I'm sure of. You may get something out of the other tenants, though."

"Hell, Mike," the captain said. "You know better than that. In a place like this nobody ever sees anything or hears anything or knows anything. Not ever. We've only found a few of them home this early in the night anyway. One is a woman who'll be giving birth inside of forty-eight hours by the looks of her. Two others are winos sleeping off the last bottle. Fat lot of help that sort will be."

"Outside of the fact nobody seemed to like this guy Moterman, what sort of motive do you have?" Shayne

asked. "Just offhand I'd guess at robbery."

"That would be the poorest guess of the day," Captain Ryan said. "He had forty-three dollars in his wallet and an envelope full of cash in the desk drawer with his register book. How much does that add to?" he called to one of the detectives who was over at the desk.

"Over five hundred dollars so far," the man called back. Then, in a tone of some excitement, "Hey. Wait a minute. Maybe you better take a look at this, Cap."

Ryan and Shayne walked over to the desk. The detective was holding one bill under the light from the desk lamp. It was a fifty-dollar note. On one corner somebody had written a phone number in red ink and surrounded it with a crudely drawn heart made with the same pen.

"Yeah," Ryan said. "I guess I'd better look at that."

"What's up?" Shayne asked.

"There could be a lot more than just the scragging of an old neighborhood Fagan," Ryan said. "That bill is on my wanted list. It was part of the loot from yesterday morning's downtown bank robbery. The teller remembers taking it in, and then putting it with the money he gave the robber. The papers weren't told because it's one of the very few possible clues we've got."

"The bank robber?" Shayne said. "You think he ties to this killing? But where's the rest of the loot? There's forty grand still missing."

"Yeah," Ryan said. "Lots of things are missing. Forty thousand dollars. Your Amy Malone. Her room mate. One bank robber and one killer. Let's not forget the killer."

He turned to the other police in the room. "Boys, I'm phoning in for more men. I want this whole area blocked off and searched so well you get the fingerprints of every cockroach in the walls. I think we've got us a lot more than just a knifing here."

When he'd finished his call, Ryan turned back to Shayne. "I suppose you'll be underfoot for the rest of this case."

"Why me? Nobody hired me to do anything yet."

"Don't you read your pal Rourke in the *News*? The bank and its insurance companies take a dim view of the easy way all that cash was lifted. There's a total of twenty thousand posted in rewards for the man who did the job."

"Well, well," Shayne said. "In that case I guess you can count me in at that."

"That's what I was afraid of," Ryan said.

V

THE FIRST THING Mike Shayne did was check the tattered notebook the landlord of the Pelican Cabins had used as a register. He wanted the name and any other information

he could get about Amy Malone's missing room mate.

To the big man's rather considerable surprise, Amy's name wasn't in the register at all. The cabin he'd gone to with her was listed in the name of Jean Carbone. That was all—no Miss or Mrs., no indication of double occupancy—nothing about occupation of the tenant or previous address. That didn't surprise Shayne too much. The records were usually pretty sloppy in a place of this sort.

He was surprised at the lack of any mention of an Amy Malone though. He noted that she'd told the truth in one thing. The rent was paid up for some days in advance.

There was no mention at all of the mystery man Moterman claimed had rented the cabin and ordered the padlock put on the door. After the murder he hadn't really expected to find that name, but it left him with very little to really go on.

His first target would be to find the missing Amy Malone. Even in a city the size of Miami, he didn't anticipate that it would be too difficult a job. Even if she was trying to hide, he should be able to find her trail easily enough.

He had seen the girl and could describe her. He knew she worked odd jobs as an itinerant entertainer, and he already knew most of the bars and cheap lounges where her kind could find employment. It was most probable she worked close to home anyway, and there was a con-

centration of such places in the Seventy-ninth Street area.

The second place where Mike Shayne stopped knew of Amy. The bartender at his fourth stop was able to supply more information.

"I hear she's been singing at the Spotted Cat for the last couple of weeks, Mike," he said. "You know where that is?"

"I know. Thanks, Jim," Shayne said.

The Spotted Cat was a real tough joint—what its habitués called "a real blood and guts jookin' joint"—on the northwest side. The regular customers were strongarm hoodlums and bums. Not a clean shirt in a dozen of them once a week.

Jerry Botts, the bartender, was also the owner. He wore long, greasy hair and a dirty undershirt and a gold ring in the lobe of his left ear. He and Mike Shayne had had difficulties on more than one occasion.

"I don't serve cops or rat finks," Botts said when Shayne stepped up to the bar.

"Don't worry," the big man said. "The watered-down slop you sell would poison a man. I'm looking for Amy Malone. She come in yet?"

The owner grinned an evil grin at him. "Well, well," he said, "so Amy's started playing around with your sort. For that I'll fire her if she does come in again."

"Shut up the wisecracks, Jerry," Shayne told him. "I can knock your teeth out and play jackstraws with



them and you know it. I'm not fooling with you. Where's Amy?"

"In bed with some bum, I suppose," Jerry Botts said. "How do I know? I don't keep track of every round-heeled tramp comes in here to hustle a few bucks."

At that precise instant the door leading from behind the bar into the rear of the old frame building opened and someone looked out. The light was dim in the Spotted Cat anyway and Shayne got only a fleeting glimpse at the face which peered out. It was enough to tantalize but not make certain.

Both the detective and the man peering through the door did a quick double take. Then the man ducked back and the door slammed shut.

Mike Shayne put both hands on the bar and vaulted over. The floor-

ing inside the bar was covered with a strip of worn linoleum which was wet and slippery from water, grease and spilled beer suds from the taps. Shayne's feet slipped out from under him when he landed and he almost fell. He would have if his outflung left hand hadn't caught the shelf back of the bar. A couple of whiskey bottles fell off and broke on the floor to spread a sour reek of cheap, watered down alcohol.

The bar owner grabbed up the heavily weighted mallet he used as a bung starter and took a vicious swing at the big redhead. Shayne was trying to get his balance and barely managed to avoid the blow. It would have caved in his skull if it had landed.

He struck out at the man, but the blow lost most of its force because of his lack of balance. Botts shrugged it off without even staggering. He grinned at Mike Shayne and cocked his arm back for a finishing smash with the mallet.

Shayne gave up trying to brace his feet for a firm stance on the slippery flooring. He grabbed the bar with his left hand and the shelf in back of it with his right. The muscles of arms and shoulders corded as he swung both feet up clear of the broken glass under foot.

With a coordinated effort of every muscle in his big frame the detective bent his knees, put his feet together and kicked out at the grinning Botts.

His feet took Jerry Botts in the

belly and drove him up and back to crash into the wall at the end of the bar. His breath was knocked out and his whole body paralyzed by the force of those pile driver legs. The mallet fell out of his nerveless fingers.

Mike Shayne ignored the man on the floor and grabbed the knob of the door back of the bar. It was locked. The big man braced his shoulders against the bar and kicked with both feet again. The flimsy lock tore out of the wood and the door sagged open.

Behind him, Shayne heard the bar customers begin to yell. Botts, on the floor, was trying to say something. But all he could get out was a sort of whining yammer without any coherence or meaning.

Mike Shayne went through the broken door.

The room on the other side was a sort of combined office and storage space. There were cases of whiskey, rum and gin stacked against the walls and a dirty, splintered desk under the one window. In one corner was a very old, heavy iron office safe.

Shayne ignored all this. He was looking for the man who had opened the door. A quick glance showed him he was alone in the room.

One door led to a stinkingly dirty lavatory. That was empty of any life bigger than a two-inch cockroach perched on the edge of the crusted handbasin.

There was another door. It was

locked too, and Shayne had to smash it half off the hinges with a lunge of his big shoulder to get it open. Fortunately, this lock too was old and inferior and gave way at once. By now even Mike Shayne was panting from his exertions.

Inside the bar Jerry Botts must have been making a rapid recovery. Shayne could hear his voice, and the customers were giving tongue like a pack of hunting dogs working up their nerve to attack a trapped animal.

The yard in back of the bar was a tangle of junk and debris built up over the past twenty years' occupancy. It cluttered and piled and crested over the rusted-out body of a 1941 pickup truck. In view of the utter worthlessness of the mess a high wire fence and padlocked gate seemed totally incongruous, but it was there anyway.

In the far corner of the yard the dark figure of a man was trying to climb the fence and making a very poor job of it.

Mike Shayne started for the man. He had to get over or around an incredible accumulation of junk in the dark, and it slowed him down as it must have earlier slowed the man now fighting the fence.

That one must have realized he wasn't going to get over in time. He dropped back into the yard, snatched up a length of rusted iron pipe from the piled debris for a weapon and set his back against the fence.

Mike Shayne slowed even more

but kept on moving in. The man's face was shadowed. The detective made no effort to pull his gun. He wanted this man in shape to be questioned and once a gun is drawn it's likely to be used.

Inside the bar the yelling got louder. Botts and his customers were up and piling into the office back of the bar. In another few seconds they'd be out in the yard and able to take a hand in the ruckus.

There just wasn't time enough.

Before Shayne could get close enough to grapple the man he was after, he heard the others coming through the door in back of him. A glance over his shoulder showed him there were six of them, counting a furious Jerry Botts. A couple more had stopped in the office and were grabbing full bottles from the stacked cases and stuffing them into their shirts.

Six were enough to fight though. Enough and to spare without even counting the man at the fence.

Shayne swung to face the new attackers and grabbed for his gun. He figured to use it to hold them all at bay and order the fugitive over where he could get a grip on him.

The man at the fence got the idea too, but he wasn't about to just wait to be taken. As soon as Shayne turned his head away, the man whirled his iron pipe club around his head and hurled it at the big man as hard as he could throw.

The whirling missile fetched Shayne a hard crack on the side of

the head. It didn't land square. That might have killed him and would certainly have knocked him out. The blow was a glancing one, but still hard enough to stagger a man even as big and strong as Shayne.

He forgot his gun, staggered and threw out his hands to catch his balance. In that moment the men from the bar were on him, kicking, slugging, gouging for his eyes. Half "out" as he was from the blow, their rush bore Shayne back. He would have fallen except that he brought up with his back against the side of the wrecked pickup truck.

If Shayne went down they'd kick him to death and he knew it. His only chance was to stay on his feet, and somehow — just barely — he managed to do that.

The blows rained on his head and arms. Kicks lashed at his legs and stomach, barely missing the crippling and paralyzing spots for which they were aimed. He shook his head and held his ground with sheer desperation added to the accumulated fighting and survival skills of the years.

They were drunk and Shayne was sober. They wasted their strength and got in each other's way in the dark and clutter and confusion. They let the precious moments slip by in which they might just possibly have pulled him down.

Then Shayne began to recover. He clawed the big gun out and fired a shot into their faces. The forty-five was like a cannon fired at close

range. He didn't hit anyone but the blast and the concussion seemed to blow them back away from him.

Their drunken minds took note of the gun and the fight was over. They turned and ran for the shelter of the building.

A block away the screaming siren of a police prowl car answered the shot.

Shayne turned his head. Too late. The man at the fence had gotten over while the fight was on.

VI

BY THE TIME the prowl car pulled up in front of the Spotted Cat, the erstwhile belligerent customers were long gone. Most of them had taken along a few hastily snatched bottles of liquid refreshment as souvenirs of the occasion and balm for the cuts and bruises they had suffered in the combat. They weren't sure what the fight had been about, of course, but each one was firmly convinced he'd acquitted himself in a truly heroic fashion.

Besides Mike Shayne in the bar itself there was only one old wino in a blue sport shirt who'd slept through the whole brawl and was still dreaming—and of course the proprietor, Jerry Botts.

Botts hadn't given up. When the cops came in he started howling at the top of his voice.

"That bum!" He was pointing at Mike Shayne. "That lousy no-good

bum. That tin star shamus. Arrest him. Put the cuffs on him."

"What for?" asked the senior patrolman. He was a grizzled veteran of twenty years on the Miami force, and he'd known Mike Shayne for most of those years. He wasn't about to get tough with a close personal friend of Chief Will Gentry.

"What for?" Jerry Botts echoed. "You crazy or sump'n? That bum come in here and stuck up my joint. You search him. He's carrying a gun."

"He's got a license for it," Sergeant Jimson said.

"Well, he ain't got no license to use it in a heist. Look around. He kicked that door down. If it wasn't my clients helped me jump him, he'd of cleaned out the joint."

"This joint? Cleaned it? Impossible."

"I tell you he stuck the place up. Ain't you gonna make the pinch?" Jerry was outraged.

"You stick up the man's place, Mike?" Jimson asked.

"Hell, no," Shayne said.

"You see," the cop said to Botts. "He didn't do it."

"Sure he did. He kicked my door down too. Look at it. He shot at me."

"If he had you'd be dead," Jimson said. "Mike Shayne doesn't miss. How about the door, Mike? You kick it out like he says?"

Shayne found a bottle of medium good whiskey on the shelf back of the bar and helped himself to a



three-finger snort. He poured one for each of the prowler car men.

"Yeah," Shayne said. "I guess I did at that. When you make your report say I was in hot pursuit of a wanted man at the time."

"That would alter the case just a mite," the sergeant opined. "Just what was he wanted for?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Shayne said. He didn't want the police too deeply involved in his own private investigation at this point, and he knew that even a hint of involvement with the bank robbery would put them on instant alert. Jerry Botts would be taken downtown at once for further questioning. Mike Shayne wanted to do that questioning himself.

"I'm not ready to file a charge against Botts yet," he said, jerking his thumb toward the suddenly silent bartender. "He might not have known what was up. If I think there's a reason for a formal charge,

I'll make one later and swear out a warrant at the same time."

The two policemen may or may not have had an inkling what Shayne was up to, but they weren't going to argue about it at that moment. They completed a routine report on the "disturbance of the peace" at the bar, and took off. If Sergeant Jimson then got on the intercom to Captain Bill Ryan of Homicide, he waited until he was out of range of Mike Shayne before he did so.

As soon as the prowler car was out of the way Shayne turned to face the owner of the bar. Jerry Botts no longer looked as if he wanted to start trouble. In fact, he tried an ingratiating smile at the big red-head.

"All a mistake, I guess," he said. "Let's have a drink and forget it, huh?"

Mike Shayne just looked at him.

Botts couldn't face that look. His eyes dropped and he shifted his feet and dropped his shoulders uneasily.

"Look, Shayne," he said defensively, "how was I to know you was on police business? Maybe I was a little high myself too, huh? You know how it is?"

"I know how it is," Mike Shayne said. "I know one word from me and Homicide pulls you in for the worst sweating ever seen in this town. They want the people heisted that forty grand, Jerry. They want them bad enough to pull you apart and throw away the pieces to find out what you know."

"I don't know anything," Jerry Botts said, starting to move away with small, sideways shuffling movements of his feet. "I swear it. I don't know nothing about any heist. I don't."

One of Mike Shayne's long arms reached across the bar and his huge, powerful hand caught Botts by the throat and hauled him forward till the man was lying half across the bar.

"Listen, Botts," Shayne said. "I want those people too. I want them bad enough to do whatever I have to to get them. Don't lie to me."

"I ain't lying," Botts choked out.

It was all he got to say. Shayne held him with his big right hand and used the back of his equally massive left to cuff the man's head back and forth. The blows were hard enough to dizzy him and loosen a couple of teeth. Jerry Botts squirmed feebly.

"Don't waste my time," Shayne said and hit him again. "I'm in a hurry, boy. Who was the man hiding in your back room?"

"I didn't even know he was in there."

"Stop lying. Next time I'll knock your teeth out."

"Aw, cut it, shamus." The fight was gone out of Jerry Botts. "I dunno who he was. He just came in a while back and give me a double sawbuck to let him stay in there a while. He said he was sick. That's all I know. Honest it is."

"Does the name Moterman ring

a bell with you?" Shayne watched the man keenly as he spoke.

To his surprise Botts showed no special reaction. "No. Honest no. Unless you mean on a street car—"

"I don't," Shayne said. He hauled the man all the way across the bar, shook him as a terrier shakes a rat, and tumbled him onto the filthy floor. "I can stomp your face off, Jerry," he assured the recumbent form. "I can kick your guts to a jelly. You going to make me do it? Or will you tell me what I want to know? Hurry and make up your mind. If you got a mind."

Jerry Botts cowered as if he wanted to press himself through one of the floor boards. He was weeping now, and when he spoke his voice held a whine of sheer desperation.

"Honest, Shayne. I'd say if I knew. I don't know nobody named Moterman. I don't know who that was in there. Like I told you, he paid me to hide him. What do I know what he done? In my business I don't even care. You know that. Honest, I wouldn't lie to you. Not you."

Mike Shayne didn't believe a word of that, of course. He couldn't know how much truth there was in what Botts said, but he was pretty sure there wasn't much more he could find out.

Shayne was baffled.

When the mystery man had looked out of the back room at the Spotted Cat, the big detective had been sure for a moment that the face he

saw belonged to Moterman the landlord.

That was crazy, of course. Moterman was already on the way to the police morgue where his body would rapidly stiffen on one of the little wheeled carts where the bodies of murdered men were put to await a corner's autopsy.

There was no way at all that he could be walking around the back room of this lousy little northwest side clip joint. Just no way at all he could be climbing fences and hurling rusty iron pipe missiles. No way.

On the other hand Mike Shayne was a trained observer. Years in a demanding and frequently dangerous business had taught him to stay alert and not make mistakes about what he saw.

He wasn't going to get anything out of Botts, though. Maybe he didn't know who he'd been hiding. It was quite possible that he didn't.

He decided to change his line of questioning.

"You're lying," he told Jerry Botts, "but I'll let it go for now. When I came in here I asked for Amy Malone. Let's get back to that. Where is she?"

"I don't know that neither. I don't keep track of the tramps come in here to hustle drinks. Not even if they sing, too. She don't work for me. All she gets is tips."

For once there was a ring of sincerity in the man's voice which persuaded Shayne he was probably

hearing the truth this time. His hesitation encouraged Jerry Botts.

"You want Amy," he whined, "go find that black-haired sidekick of hers. Jean Carbone her name is. She works the Rose Garden."

VII

THE ROSE GARDEN was a cut above the Spotted Cat—or maybe a cut below in the general scale of South Florida night life. It all depended on what you were looking for and your own particular point of view.

It occupied a fairly large, not really old building over on North Biscayne Boulevard. A succession of owners variously advertised it as bar, lounge, rendezvous and dance hall. The second floor usually doubled as a house of ill fame.

At the moment it was in one of its dance hall phases. The signs out front told of fifty gorgeous girls. Actually there were only six of them, and it would have been stretching the truth to its final limits to describe any one of the bevy as gorgeous.

That may have been why the lights were kept so dim.

When Shayne walked through the front door those lights were very dim indeed. There were only two hooded red bulbs of barely ten watts apiece. The booths were curtained. Presumably, if a client wanted to examine his date, he could use the braille system. The girls were willing.

Two of the gorgeous girls were occupied when Mike Shayne arrived. The other four converged on him as if by use of some personal radar of their own.

Three of the four were blondes, at least for tonight. The other was not. Shayne remembered hearing Jean described as a brunette.

"Are you Jean Carbone?" he asked.

"I sure am, lover," she said in a low throaty voice with just a trace of old country accent. "Do I know you from some place, dear?"

"Not yet," the big man told her. "I know a friend of yours. Amy Malone."

"Did she send you?" The tone was cooler than before. "No. She wouldn't do that. You must be looking for her."

"You know where she is?"

The woman looked him up and down. His eyes were beginning to get used to the dim light and he could see that she was big like Amy, though stouter and softer fleshed. Her hips were curved and her big breasts thrust up and out against the sleazy hostess gown. Her eyes were dark under heavy mascara and her mouth full and sensuous. She wore her black hair shoulder length.

Evidently she liked what she saw too.

"Look, lover," Jean said. "I can't just stand here and talk. Not even about Amy. The boss wants any man I say boo to to be buying me

drink when he hears it. How about ?”

“Okay,” Shayne said. He let her lead him over to one of the curved booths. It was semi-circular in shape and inside they sat side by side on a deeply cushioned crescent bench.

When the waiter came, Shayne told him to bring a bottle of the best brandy in the house and two glasses.

“You might as well get a real drink this time,” he told Jean Carbone.

The check for the brandy was twenty-two dollars. Shayne winced when he paid for it, but remembered the reward for the bank robber and helled out.

She matched his three-finger drink and took it down like a man in one swallow, without water or any other chaser.

“That’s good, lover,” she said in that throaty voice of hers. “Real good. Now tell me what you want with Jean.”

“I want a few answers,” Shayne said. He wondered if the booth was nudged. In a joint like this they frequently were. He put a quarter in the remote control slot for the automatic record machine. When it began to play, he turned the volume up.

“Nothing much,” he said. “Just a few questions.”

She laughed and poured herself another drink. Then she moved close



er so that her leg and thigh were pressed against his:

“I was hoping it was more personal, lover,” she said.

“Just a few questions,” Shayne repeated.

She laughed again. “You and I can make better music than that juke box,” she said. “How about after this place closes? I can get away about three o’clock.”

“I thought you girls entertained here.”

“If we do it’s on the boss’ time and no fun for us,” she said. “Besides, it would cost you a lot.” She took a slip of paper out of her beaded bag, wrote an address with lipstick, and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

“Don’t keep me waiting, lover.” She leaned over and took Shayne’s

cheeks in her hands and kissed him full on the mouth. Her lips were hot and demanding so that he found himself answering the kiss.

Then he pulled away from her. "You're making me forget what I came for."

"Oh, no. I'm just making sure you remember what you're going to come for later on tonight. What's so important about those questions anyway? You an old friend of Amy?"

"I never saw her before tonight," he said truthfully. "I've got a message for her from somebody else. That's all. When I deliver it, I don't have to see her again."

The woman reached into his pocket and took out cigarettes and put one in her mouth. There were matches on the table, and she lit one, keeping her hands cupped about the flame. He could see her big, dark eyes looking at him over the match. It was the first chance either of them had had to get a good look at the other. Her eyes were enigmatic.

"You could be Mike Shayne, couldn't you?" she said finally in a low voice. She blew out the match. "Of course you could, lover. Big, redheaded, tough and handsome. Hot eyes in a poker face. That could be Mike Shayne."

"What difference would that make?" he asked.

"In our date for later?" she parried. "None at all. Are you Shayne?"

"I didn't mean that," he said. "I

meant in whether you answer my questions."

"I'll answer them, but first you answer mine. Are you Mike Shayne the private eye?"

"Yes," he said. "Now look. We're wasting time. I have to see Amy before I can come to you tonight. The sooner you tell me where to look—

He let it rest there. She moved her leg against his and laughed that hot, throaty laugh again.

"I see. Well, Mike, I don't exactly know where she is right now. I know some of her hangouts, of course"—she named half a dozen places on the north side—"If she's not there, she may even come by my place later on. We've been friends for a good many years. If she's hiding out she could think of my place as a safe place to go. You go look at the other places first, though. You just might run into her at any one of them."

She turned up her face and kissed him again. In the near dark, and with the strong, raw brandy in his veins, Shayne found himself responding in spite of his better judgment.

He made himself move away from her.

"When did you move away from old Moterman's place?" he found himself asking.

"Just this morning," she said easily. "I been looking for a better place though. That old creep gives me the jumps. He thinks he can make a pass at every girl lives there and she

as to like it. Part of the rent, he must think it is. Believe me, lover, don't want to see that one again. sure don't,"

She talked of Moterman as if he were still alive, Shayne thought. That's the way it should be. The news of the killing wasn't out yet. On the other hand what makes her think Amy could be hiding out? Unless Amy's been in touch with her, of course. But then she'd know Moterman was dead. Or would she at that? Amy didn't go to the house when he found the body.

He made a mental note to look into the matter of this Jean Carbone a bit more thoroughly. All he said though was: "Okay. Well, I'll check the places you mentioned. See you later, honey."

"Don't keep me waiting, lover," he said. "You going to take this bottle with you? It's yours. You bought it."

"I'll take it," he said. "We can finish it off at your place." That was what she'd had in mind, of course.

When Mike Shayne left the Rose Garden he checked out only a couple of the addresses Jean Carbone had given him as possible places to find Amy Malone.

She hadn't been seen at either one that night. Shayne wasn't surprised. If Amy really was hiding out, it wouldn't be at any place where she was well known. People might come looking for her there. No—she'd go to some place where people weren't likely to expect her or

even notice she was among those present.

There were a thousand cheap bars, honkytonks and juke joints on the North Side alone without even taking into account motels, hotels and rooming houses.

To try to search them all would be a hopeless job, and the big man hadn't the slightest intention of trying it.

Instead he decided to go back to the Pelican Motel Cabins. There were a couple of things about the scene of the murder Mike Shayne wanted to look into now that most of the police would have left the place.

As he'd expected, there was only one uniformed man on duty, and he was at the motel office where Moterman's body had been found. The detectives and lab men, photogs and print technicians had finished their work and moved on. A hot summer Saturday night in Miami was prolific of violence and the police couldn't afford to linger between frequent emergency calls.

The man on duty knew Mike Shayne.

"Sorry, Mr. Shayne," he said. "I got orders from Captain Ryan not to let you in this building. I hope you understand. If it was up to me you know I'd—"

"It's okay, Sid," Shayne said. "I guess Ryan had his reasons. No objection to my nosing around the rest of the campus here though, is there?"

The patrolman grinned. He was relieved that Shayne wasn't going to argue about getting into the murder room. He didn't crave being caught between the powerful captain of homicide and the close personal friend of Chief Gentry.

"Sure, Mr. Shayne," he said. "Suit yourself. If you can stand this dump, nothing was said about keeping you off it."

The double row of cabins was much more alive by now than it had been earlier in the evening. Some of the tenants had waked up. Others had come home. Friends and neighbors had come over to talk about the killing. There were drinking bouts going on in at least two of the cabins, and people coming and going between the others.

Shayne went on back to the cabin where he'd watched Amy Malone pack her clothes earlier in the evening. It was dark and locked, of course, but that didn't stop him. The cheap lock on the rear door to the place opened at once to the ring of pass keys he habitually carried with him.

Inside the kitchen he used the small flashlight he'd brought from the glove compartment of his car. The place was dirty and disorderly. That he'd expected.

The gleam of white cloth from the dirty oilskin floor under the table caught his eye. It was a woman's handkerchief of the sort that can be bought for a few cents in any dime or sundry store. It was machine-

stitched with a monogram initial in contrasting color. This one was a block letter M. M for Malone, of course.

Since Amy had lived in the cabin that wasn't unusual. What did get Shayne's attention was that this particular handkerchief had been used to mop somebody's face or brow within the last ten or fifteen minutes. It was still sopping wet with what Shayne assumed had to be sweat.

"She's a smart one," Shayne told himself. "Sneaked right back here and hid out. Must have still had her key to the place. Last place in the world anybody would look for her."

He walked quickly into the bedroom, letting the flash go dark so as not to attract attention from outside.

There was a dark form on one of the twin Hollywood beds.

"Come on, Amy," Shayne said. "Rise and shine. It's me again."

Nothing moved so he flicked on the little flashlight.

It wasn't Amy Malone on the bed. It was a man lying face down. There was blood all over the back of his shirt where he'd been knifed three times.

VIII

MIKE SHAYNE took one look at the corpse on the bed and clicked off his flash. He drew his gun and made a fast circle of the small cab-



in. There was nobody else in any of the rooms. The front door to the place was closed and locked, but that might have been done from either inside or outside the building.

When he was sure he was alone Shayne went back into the bedroom. He wanted another look at the body.

The man was a big one. He wore brown wash-and-wear slacks, brown shoes and a short-sleeved white shirt. As far as Shayne could tell by the feel of the body and the extent to which the blood from the wounds had dried and clotted, he had been dead at least an hour or so. The redhead couldn't be sure.

He patted the man's pockets. Aside from cigarettes and matches

and a ring of car keys they seemed to be empty. There wasn't any wallet. Shayne made doubly sure of that.

He rolled the body over on its back. He didn't want to risk using his flashlight again, but there was reflected city light coming in through the window next to the bed. It wasn't much but Mike Shayne got a good look at the dead man's face, good enough so he could make out the features.

Shayne let go of the body's shoulders so that it fell back on the bed. He straightened up and stood back a step while icy fingers of fear suddenly massaged his spine and a cold knot grew in the pit of his stomach.

The face of the man on the bed showed clearly in the reflected light.

It was the face of Moterman, the landlord.

"My God," Mike Shayne said to himself. "What is this guy? How many times does he have to be killed?"

Mike Shayne had been around. He'd seen things that would turn most men's hair grey, but for just a moment he wanted to turn and walk out of that room, away from the ghastly grinning face on the bed.

Outside the cabin a drunken tenant was singing the blues and slurring the words as he did so. A radio blared and glasses tinkled in a cabin down the line. In the street in front of the Pelican a big trailer truck roared its motor and ground

gears as it turned west away from Miami Avenue.

Mike Shayne stood there in the half dark and pondered. Whoever it was that lay there on the bed Shayne didn't know but it couldn't be the same man. This man was unmarked in front. He had been stabbed three times through the back, not the chest, and he hadn't been dead long enough for rigor mortis to set in as yet. His clothes weren't the same.

Shayne looked again and decided that the face wasn't quite the same either. This one was clean shaved for one thing, where the landlord's chin had been blue with stubble. The face as a little fleshier also. This man had lived cleaner and eaten better than the landlord.

"Twins, by God!" Shayne said to himself. "Twins. This must be the one looked in on me at the Spotted Cat. But how did he get here? And who killed him?"

So there were two men called Moterman. So why were they both killed? Were they mixed up in the bank robbery that had taken forty thousand dollars on Friday morning?

That was the logical deduction. On the other hand neither Moterman brother fitted the description of the actual heist man. He had been of medium height, medium build, paunchy, soft in appearance. These were big men and tough. They couldn't be disguised to fit the robber's description.

Also, where did Amy Malone fit

into the picture? Amy and Jean Carbone too, for that matter. Neither was the type to be looked for in a bank robbery of such magnitude and so cleverly executed. They were a couple of cheap broads. Mugging or the badger game or drunk rolling was more their style.

Also, how did this particular cabin in a rundown motel, going to seed in the slums, come in? Why this place? What made it a trap of death?

At least Shayne figured he might solve that question.

In the dark, using the little flashlight only when he had to, Shayne set out to search the tumbledown cabin with a fine-tooth comb.

He found what he was looking for in the bedroom itself. There was no real closet. The building had been erected when these were still a novelty in the poorer sections of southern cities. However, one corner of the bedroom had been crudely partitioned off with a piece of plywood and a hanging curtain in lieu of a door. This was where Amy Malone had hung her clothing and where she'd gotten it when she packed the big suitcase.

In the floor of this closet was a crude trapdoor made by sawing a piece from each of three floorboards. Some former tenant had probably made it to safeguard what he fondly imagined to be his valuables. He'd cut the boards loose and set an old wooden army ammunition box under them, nailing it to a floor beam.

It didn't take Mike Shayne long to determine that the box had recently been in use. For one thing the dust which would ordinarily have sifted in between the floor boards was missing.

Shayne made sure the crudely made hiding place was empty. He left the lid back on as he'd found it. If the police looked, they'd find it easily enough. He didn't want them to know he had located it first.

"What do you bet," he asked the corpse on the bed, "that there was forty thousand dollars in that hole in the floor when I was in here this evening? No wonder your twin or your double or whoever the devil he is didn't want me prowling around in here."

The corpse didn't answer. Its dead face didn't even show the slightest interest. This one had no longer any need for stolen cash in any amount.

Shayne finished his search of the building without finding anything of interest.

He carefully folded the handkerchief with the M on it and put it in his jacket pocket. It was already nearly dry from evaporation.

Then he emptied the dead man's pockets, carefully examining each object he took out, then wiping it clean of his fingerprints and putting it back where he'd found it.

For the most part it was a pitiful collection of worthless and meaningless trivia. The sort of junk a man

can accumulate almost without meaning to do so.

There was only one item which interested the big detective at all. In the pocket where the wallet must have been there was a folded scrap of paper.

When he shone his flash on it he saw an address written in pencil. It looked familiar but he didn't place it at first. He held the paper in his fingers while he tried to picture the location.

Then he realized it had to be the address of the Rose Garden Lounge. He folded the paper and put it in his own pocket with the handkerchief.

Then he let himself out the back door of the cabin and carefully locked it behind him. On his way to his car he carefully kept out of sight of the policeman still guarding the office.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE was hungry. He drove away from the Pelican Cabins and cut east to Biscayne Boulevard to an all-night steak house that had long been a favorite with him and Lucy Hamilton.

He ordered the thickest cut of sirloin they had with home-fried potatoes, fresh asparagus, a tossed salad and a small loaf of crusty bread that was baked on the premises and steaming hot from the oven. It was a mammoth dinner, but Shayne was a big man and he'd used up a great

deal of energy in the last few hours.

He sat by a window where he could look out on the multi-colored neons and endlessly streaming golden headlamps that beaded the Boulevard and felt his big body pick up and store energy from the food as he ate.

It was clear to him now that one or both of the Moterman brothers had been involved in the downtown bank robbery. There had also undoubtedly been a third man who had done the actual robbery. Shayne didn't yet know who he was, but he had begun to get an idea where to find him. Either Amy Malone or Jean Carbone was also involved. Maybe just one or maybe both of the women. He wasn't yet sure.

Part of the plot he was involved with seemed relatively easy to unravel. The Moterman brothers were certainly part of the robbery. Shayne figured the loot had been taken directly to the Pelican Cabins and hidden in the locker under the floor of Amy and Jean's cabin. Probably the landlord didn't want to risk hiding it in the office building in case he was suspected. Or else he knew of the recess under the floor from past dealings of one sort or another.

Of course, with the money hid there, he'd want the women out of the cabin. His mistake had been in not giving Amy her clothes and personal things. Why Jean had been allowed to take hers Shayne didn't know. She might have been in on the plot or it might just have been

because she'd slept with the landlord and he liked her.

In any case, when Shayne had forced his way into the cabin, Amy must have found the money when collecting her clothing. Probably the robbers had left traces—perhaps had not closed the door properly—when they hid the money. Amy just put the cash in her suitcase and took off as soon as she was out of sight of Mike Shayne.

Meanwhile, Moterman number one, the landlord, was knifed. Why? The big detective still had to figure that out. The brother, Moterman-two, might have done the killing. More likely he was helped by the heist man, Mr. X, who had taken the cash from the bank.

Moterman-two must have looked for the money and found it gone and then figured Amy had it. When he followed her trail it led him to the Spotted Cat just as it had Mike Shayne. The fight there followed when Shayne surprised him. Was Jerry Botts in the plot? Shayne still wasn't sure, but he thought not.

Shayne ordered apple pie topped with a triple order of vanilla ice cream, black coffee and good brandy. He continued to think as he pitched into the dessert.

Amy Malone would know, of course, that whoever had hidden all that cash would be after her. She wouldn't dare go to any of her usual haunts. She'd be smart enough to figure that out, but not to realize her only chance was to get clean

of town. Girls like Amy are
ewd rather than intelligent.

Shrewdness led her back to the
in as a perfect hiding hole. Who'd
k for her there?

Only—when she got there she
ist have found the body of Mo-
man already laid out on the bed.
e damp handkerchief proved she'd
en there only a short time before
ke Shayne arrived. The big man
nned when he pictured her panic.
e news media had the story of
e landlord's murder by then.

Did Amy think this was his body?
d she even know there were twin
others? Shayne pictured the sheer
nd panic Amy must have felt.
had been bad enough in his own
se.

Whatever she felt, she must have
stinctively bolted away from the
alican Cabins for the second time
at day. Where to? Shayne didn't
ow, but a guess was forming it-
lf in the back of his mind.

That could wait for the moment.
e had a date with Jean Carbone
id he meant to keep it. Not for
r generously tendered, if some-
hat blemished, charms. He wanted
know what the raven-haired
oman had to do with the case.
ould she finger the killer of the
loterman brothers for him? Or was
ie herself that killer?

If Amy had gone where he sus-
ected, she'd stay there. After find-
ig the corpse on the bed, he didn't
ink she'd risk any more encounters
at night.



Mike Shayne had more urgent
problems than Amy Malone. He
was up against a ruthless and very
dangerous killer. There were already
two corpses to prove it, and Shayne
didn't want to provide a third over-
size corpus delicti for Captain Ryan
and Will Gentry to puzzle over.

The killer was also clever. The
way the bank robbery itself had
been engineered proved that. So did
the fact that at every step of this
case so far the killer had been just
a little ahead of both Mike Shayne
and the cops.

Shayne would be making a ter-
rible mistake to underestimate his
man. It could even be a fatal mis-
take. It was a good bet that by now
the man knew Shayne was involved
in the case. To judge by his past
penchant for knife work, that could
be a sentence of death for the red-
head. Shayne knew that well enough,
but he finished the pie and ice cream
with relish, laced his coffee liberal-
ly with the brandy, and lit a long
black cigar. The food was renewing
his optimism as well as his strength.

He was due for a shock when he left the restaurant, however. His car wasn't around the corner where he'd parked it only an hour before. In fact, it wasn't any place in sight.

"Oh, hell," Shayne said to the uncaring croton bushes. "What a time to have my wheels stolen."

He knew he'd left the car locked. At least he was sure that he had. He always did. However, that would not pose any real difficulty for an experienced professional car thief. They carried keys to open any standard car and work the ignition. As a matter of fact, Shayne had a few such keys himself. There were times when they came in handy in his own line of work.

At the moment that was small comfort.

Luckily the address Jean Carbone had given him wasn't far away. It meant a walk of a few blocks north and a few more west and that was all.

Shayne debated calling the police and reporting the theft of his car, and then decided against it. If the body of Moterman-two had been found, it was likely that Captain Ryan would be wanting a word with the redhead about that. Shayne had no desire to be delayed or questioned at this point. Time enough to worry about the car later on. It was insured anyway.

It was an easy walk. The town never slept. There were cars on the streets and still lights in many of the windows. The air was fresher in

the early morning hush. Not exactly cool. It was never really cool at a time of a Miami summer, but cool by comparison to the brazen heat of noon. If he hadn't been dealing with murder and risking his life to be Mike Shayne would have enjoyed the exercise.

There was a light on in Jean Carbone's apartment when Shayne reached the building. She had told him it was ground floor front to right of the small, musty smell entrance hall.

She must have been watching him out the window, because the door opened while his fist was raised to knock.

"Hello, lover," she said. "I've been waiting."

She put up her arms and her face and kissed him. She moved back a little then and let him come into the combination living and bedroom of the efficiency apartment.

"You still looking for Amy Malone?" she asked then.

Jean had changed out of the sleazy gown she wore at the Rocco Garden. She had on slacks that clung to hip and thigh so as to reveal every smooth curve and then belled out at the bottom. Her crimson toenails showed through the leather sandals.

Her top was a loose shirt of the most see-through material. She had a bra holding her big breasts up and out but it was a lacy thing meant to support and not conceal. The sleeves were long, hanging earbobs and

ainted mouth and eyes. In every detail she looked the part she was playing.

In every detail, that is, except for the eyes.

Under long, mascaraed lashes they looked out at Mike Shayne with a questing eagerness that had nothing to do with passion.

Oh, there was sexual attraction here, even lust. He could have taken her right then and both of them knew it. Shayne knew too that it would have been only an interlude for her, a greedily welcomed treat before she got to the real business of the night.

"Yes," he said, "I'm still looking for Amy. She isn't here, is she?"

Jean laughed in his face. "Don't look under the bed, lover," she said. "I haven't got her there. If I did you couldn't have her till I'd had you first. But that's not really why you want her, is it, dear? It's not for a tumble that you're looking for Amy. Did you bring the brandy bottle, dear?"

"Some punk stole my car," Mike Shayne said. "The bottle was in it."

She really did laugh then. She threw her head back and the beautiful soft throat rippled with mirth.

"The great Mike Shayne," she said when she could control herself. "The best private dick in the world—and somebody steals his wheels in the middle of a case." Then laughter overcame her again.

"What makes you think I'm on a case?" Shayne said suddenly.

"You know," she said. "Of course you know the answer to that. You have to know."

She moved over and turned off the one bulb burning in the lamp on the table. There was light enough from the street lamp on the corner for them to still see each other. She undid the top button of the blouse she wore.

"I want you to tell me why," Mike Shayne said.

Jean Carbone let her hand fall away from the second button of the blouse.

She walked over to the alcove that served the frowzy efficiency as a kitchenette. There was a three-burner gas stove and an apartment-sized refrigerator and a couple of shelves for dishes and dry groceries. From one of these she took a bottle of Puerto Rican rum and a couple of tumblers.

"Sorry it isn't brandy, lover," she said. "I was counting on the man to bring that tonight." Then she laughed again and poured them both a drink.

Mike Shayne drank some rum from the tumbler and looked at the woman over the rim of the glass. He smiled at her.

She smiled back at the big man.

"I like you, Mike," she said. "Really I do. We're made for each other."

"Maybe later," Shayne said, and meant it.

"I like you enough, lover, so I'm going to level with you. That's some-

thing little Jean doesn't do very often—and almost never with a man.”

“I take that for a compliment,” Shayne said.

“You should, lover. Truly you should. Of course, I'm not a fool, though maybe I act like one sometimes. Ever since you came by the Rose Garden I been wondering why a man like you would be looking for Amy Malone. It wouldn't be love. That's sure.”

She paused and drank some rum.

“So then I began to hear things,” she said, “like the radio news broadcast about old Moterman turning up with his throat cut. That sort of thing. And rumors. You know how the mooches talk around a place like the Rose Garden.”

“I know,” Shayne said. “So you began putting two and two together.”

“That's right, lover. I put two and two and I added. What came up was real interesting. Want to hear it?”

“Sure, honey,” Mike Shayne said. “I want to hear how it looks from where you are.”

“First old Moterman boots us out of that cabin,” she said. “He comes by and tells me we have to get out. Amy wasn't home. I took my things and found this dump. Real regal, ain't it, lover?”

When Shayne didn't answer she got the bottle of rum and refilled both glasses.

“Then I hear Moterman gets his throat cut. And I remember there's

just been a bank robbery. And then I remember something Moterman tells me one time when he's drunk and been making a pass at me. Do you know what that was?”

“How would I know?” the redhead asked.

“Well, it's this. There ain't one Moterman. There's two.”

“Two?”

“Yeah. How do you like them apples? You'd think they'd have broke the mold after they made one of them bums. But oh, no. There's another one. A twin. And what do you suppose he's been doing all this time his brother was making passes at me? Time for armed robbery is what. Over in Folsom prison for the last ten years.”

Mike Shayne made a mental note. This was information that could be checked out.

“So you begin to see, don't you, lover?” Jean asked. She was beginning to feel the rum, and it slurred her tones. “The twin must of come to town after he got sprung. Together the two of them heist this downtown bank. They want our cabin to hide the twin and the cash in. Only the two of them get to fighting like bums, like bums always do. The twin cuts his brother's throat. All of forty grand being better than half, I mean. That's the way he'd see it.”

“I follow you so far,” Shayne said.

“Sure,” she said impatiently. “Sure, only what they don't count



on is you coming around with Amy like the news says you done. That puts Amy in the cabin all by herself. Or was she? Did you watch her all the time she was there, lover?"

"No. I was outside the dump arguing with Moterman for quite a while."

It seemed to Shayne that Jean relaxed just a trifle when he said that. As if there'd been more to the question than the words themselves. Of course. She wanted to know if he'd gotten the loot instead of Amy. That had to be it.

"No," the redhead repeated to make sure she understood. "No, I didn't watch Amy. Why should I? I wasn't thinking about any bank loot, only that she was after her

clothes and her guitar. If there was money in there like you think, she'd have had plenty of opportunity to get away with it. I was outside — and part of the time the landlord was getting his throat cut."

"That's it," Jean said. "That's exactly the way I had it figured. You must've figured it too. That's why you're after Amy. Ain't that so? You figure she got the money."

"That's about it," Mike Shayne admitted.

"Good." Jean came over and leaned down and kissed him. "All we got to do is find Amy," Jean Carbone murmured against his mouth. "Then we got forty grand. Just for us. Just for you and me, lover."

X

MIKE SHAYNE sat up straight in his chair and set down the half-filled glass of rum. He knew they'd reached the heart of the matter, the whole reason why he'd been invited to the woman's apartment.

"You tempt me," he said. "Only doesn't all this depend on one of us knowing where to find Amy Malone?"

"Of course it does, lover," Jean Carbone said, "and I'm sure you've already figured out that's where you come in."

It was the big detective's turn to laugh now. "You're forgetting something," he said. "I'm supposed to have come here because you said

that's where she'd be. Does that sound as if I knew where she was?"

"Don't be a damn fool, lover," Jean said. "In this caper nothing sounds like what it really is. You came mostly to find out what I knew about all of this. Now you know. I leveled with you. I pointed you right at half of forty G's—big G's. Now it's time you leveled with me. Right down the line. I think you know where Amy can be found."

This was a smart woman, and Mike Shayne made up his mind not to underestimate her. He did have a pretty good idea where Amy might be. By the same token he knew perfectly well that Jean Carbone was a long way from leveling with him "right down the line." She hadn't mentioned the death of the second Moterman for one thing. Did she know about that? If not, why not? She hadn't even hinted at the X man who in Shayne's mind had to be the real killer.

All that would make sense if the woman had just figured things out by putting two and two together. Only Shayne wasn't willing to buy that story. He thought she had been on the inside of the plot from the start.

For the moment he made a characteristic decision. Mike Shayne was never one to dodge an issue or to shy away from a dangerous situation. It was his nature to force the crisis every time. That's what he decided to do in this case. He'd go along with her in the hopes it would

bring the killer out into the open.

Of course, if he was right, Jean and the killer might succeed in adding a third corpse to the case—and that corpse would be Mike Shayne. On the other hand, if Jean had told him the truth, she'd probably help him deal with the killer.

There was a third possibility. There might not be any mysterious Mr. X. Jean Carbone herself might have killed the two Moterman brothers by herself. She might be the missing factor in the case.

In any event the shank of this evening promised to be both interesting and dangerous. All this flashed through Mike Shayne's mind.

"You may be right, honey," he said to the woman. "I do have an idea where your pal Amy is right now."

She was all eagerness. "Where?"

"Not so fast," Shayne said. "She will stay there if I'm right. I think you figured it for sure. Amy found the loot from the bank when she was getting her clothes out of the cabin. She didn't know what it was—except a lot of money—so she grabbed it and took off. Then she heard about Moterman being killed and that scared her. She'd know somebody else was in the caper and he was a killer. He'd kill her for sure if he found her. She had to stay hid out."

"Yes, that's simple. I know that," Jean said. "The thing is, hide out where? This is a big town."

"You're wrong," Shayne said.

"For Amy Malone on the run it's not a big town. She can't use ninety-eight per cent of it at all. She doesn't know her way around. Trying to hide there she'd stick out like a sore thumb. She can't use any place where they know her either. Anybody could trace her there.

"Of course she could save her life by going to the cops, but not that and save the money too. Who can she trust? Why me, of course. Mike Shayne.

"Still there's one more problem. How does she get to me? I'm not at my home or office. I'm looking for her, but in places she daren't be seen. She can't put an ad in the paper or leave word with my answering service."

He paused for breath.

Jean Carbone was quick on the uptake. "She figures you're smart enough to find her. She waits in some place you'll come to but the killer doesn't know about. You'll come because it is the one place the killer doesn't know about."

"Exactly," Mike Shayne said. "That's the place I first met her. Nobody knows that place except the two of us."

"Where?" the woman asked. "Where did you meet her?"

"I won't tell you," Shayne said. "We'll go and see."

He stood up. Then he paused. "I forgot. My car's been stolen. Do you have a car we can use? The place is too far to walk."

Jean shook her head. "No car.

How much do you think that lousy job pays? Don't worry, though. There's a pay phone in the hall. I'll call us a cab."

She picked up her bag and stepped quickly into the hallway. Through the open door Shayne heard her drop a coin, dial and speak briefly. She made no effort to lower her voice and he heard her give the address of the building where they were.

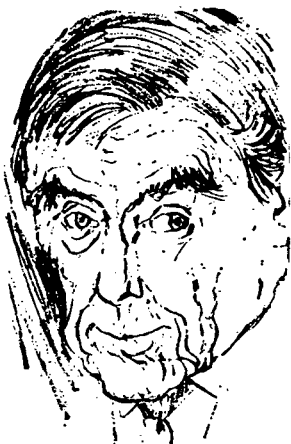
"It'll be here in a minute," she said then. "We can wait outside."

The cab was as good as her word. Within five minutes he saw the lights swing around the corner and the car pulled up. It was a standard cab from one of the regular Miami fleets. The driver didn't get out, but leaned back in his seat and unlatched the door for them to get in, and then put the meter flag down.

The man wore a wide-brimmed straw hat of the sort tourists bring back from Bermuda or the Bahamas. He made no attempt to hide his face. Shayne didn't recognize him as a known hoodlum. There was nothing suspicious or menacing about the face.

In spite of that Mike Shayne was still cautious enough not to give the address of the Gladhand Bar. He didn't want Jean Carbone managing to dump him and show up alone to confront Amy if she was there ahead of them. Instead he gave directions to the driver: "Turn here. Three blocks and turn right."

On North Miami Avenue he look-



ed ahead and was relieved to note that the sign outside the Gladhand was still lit. He was sure he'd seen a five A.M. license on the wall when he'd been in the place, but it was good to know he was right.

"Pull up there," he instructed and pointed.

This time the driver got out and opened the door for Jean Carbone. In the dim light from the bar sign Shayne could see that the man wore perfectly ordinary dark slacks and a blue sports shirt. Again he made no effort to hide his face.

"I think she'll be waiting inside," Shayne told Jean Carbone. "Go on ahead." He was expecting a showdown and he wanted the woman in front of him where he could watch her.

Something—some thought that was still vagrant but carried a charge of urgency—was struggling to sur-

face in his mind. It was the instinct of the born hunter and detective screaming a warning and it set every nerve on edge.

Jean Carbone opened the door and stepped into the dimly lit bar. Mike Shayne followed her.

He didn't hear the door close behind him.

In that split second the warning in his inner self took form and clarity. He reacted with an instinctive speed few other living men could have mustered.

Shayne pivoted in his tracks. His big right hand shot back and grabbed even before he got his face around.

The hand clamped on a wrist.

Shayne swung the rest of the way around. His big left fist came over in a smashing cross that caught the cab driver flat in that pleasant, undistinguished face of his. Teeth splintered and the man went out like a light. The knife he'd been swinging at Shayne's kidneys dropped from the nerveless fingers of his right hand.

Shayne looked at Jean Carbone. She had the ugly little .25 caliber automatic pistol half out of her purse, but she dropped it on the floor.

"Smart girl," Mike Shayne told her.

He saw Amy Malone watching, white-faced, from the booth where they'd sat together once before. "You can come out now, Amy," he said. "It's all over."

Thirty minutes later the redhead was facing his good friend at police headquarters, telling the story in his own fashion.

"But how did you know?" Police Chief Will Gentry asked Shayne. "Another split second and he'd have had his shiv in you. You'd be on a slab in the morgue right this moment."

"I don't know if I can say," Shayne said. "Instinct or luck or the thinking of a lifetime. I knew there had to be a knife man. He was always one step ahead of me—but who was he? Something I'd seen was bugging me ever since I atē. Then when the door didn't slam back of me it meant the cab driver was following. He shouldn't have. Then it clicked. The driver had a blue shirt. There was a drunk in a blue shirt on the Pelican lot when the landlord was knifed. A drunk in a blue shirt in the Spotted Cat

when Moterman's twin was there. There were just too many blue shirts and all of a sudden I knew."

"They had you set up right," Gentry said.

"Sure," Shayne said. "Even stole my car so if I took Jean to Amy she could call her pal to show up. He'd heisted the cab easy enough. She phoned him at a pay booth instead of the cab company."

"He's talked," Gentry said. "The Moterman boys planned the robbery and brought him in to do the job because he wasn't known in town. Fine, but they got too greedy. Instead of splitting the loot the landlord put a gun on him and took the whole pile. Willy-with-the-knife was just trying to get back what he thought was his. Jean was helping for a price. Everybody's mistake was getting too greedy."

"No," Mike Shayne said. "His was not changing his shirt."

In the Next Issue:

DEATH WORE A BRIDAL VEIL

A Thrilling New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Six women had tasted the bitter lash of a lecher's scorn, and only one man, Mike Shayne, stood between them and their vengeance. From the darkness, one of them called: "You're a good man, Shayne. It's really too bad you have to die like this..."

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FIFTY BUCKS BY MONDAY

*One man alone could tell me
the answer to an incredible
riddle. And he lay at the
bottom of the harbor—dead!"*

by STEPHEN DENTINGER

THE FIRST THING you see when you turn off the boardwalk is Mike Taro's stand, filled to overflowing with the junky pinwheels and cotton candy the kids always expect. Above it is our sign, a big gaudy thing that spells out *Alabaster Amusement Pier* in flashing white light bulbs. The only trouble with the sign is that about a third of the bulbs are usually out, or flickering and blinking at the wrong times, and nobody ever bothers to fix them. It's Mike Taro's job to take care of the sign, but everybody knows Mike has a bum leg and the thing just never gets done.

Once you're on the pier itself, though, it isn't too bad. At least the

view of the ocean is nice, where you can see it between the horse race game and the baseball pitch.

The best view is probably from the end of the pier, where we have a little ballroom with dancing and name entertainers. That's where my office is, tucked away in a little corner by the bandstand. It's hot most of the time, and noisy at night when the trio's working, but it's the only place there's any room.

I'm sort of the manager of the Alabaster, and I take care of things, everything from booking acts to bouncing drunks. The owners are a syndicate up in New York and they couldn't care less about the place.

Anyway, I want to tell you about



the people, and mostly about the murder, because I suppose it was the biggest thing ever happened on the Alabaster Amusement Pier.

We had this Indian carving a totem pole out near the end of the pier, right by the entrance to the ballroom where everyone could see him.

His name was Joe Bengal, but we were calling him Chief Spotted Ti-

ger because it was sort of a contest. Whoever guessed the day and hour and minute he finished the pole won fifty bucks. It was a pretty good contest, and lots of people were dropping their guesses into the slotted box, but on Friday somebody asked him how long it would take and he looked down at the indented wood and said, "Maybe Monday noon."

Friday night I was standing by his little booth, using the slack time of the supper hour to chew him out. "Look, Chief, you're getting two hundred bucks plus expenses to carve that dumb pole for our contest. Do you have to blow the thing every time some kid asks you a question?"

He looked at me with bland eyes just showing beneath his feathered headdress. "Do you expect me to lie to them?"

"Well, no." I shifted to the other foot. "But we are having this contest—"

He went back to the totem pole, chipping away at the wood with a hammer and chisel. "I just carve the pole. You run the contest."

I sighed and turned away. There was nothing more I could say to him. He hadn't liked the idea of the Indian gear in the first place. He'd tried to explain that he was a full-blooded Sioux, and that the totem carvers were mostly the Canadian and Alaskan tribes. He'd learned the art more as a hobby than anything else, the way some men have workshops in their basements, but I told him I didn't care how he'd learned it. He was an Indian and he could carve a totem pole, and that was good enough for a promotion gimmick.

I'd hired him on the spot and set him to work out near the end of the pier. Then I'd had a hundred silk screened signs distributed around

the town and sat back to wait for the crowds.

The gimmick did attract the kids, but it didn't do much to improve business for somebody like Nancy Fox, who ran the gift shoppe just a few feet along the pier before Spotted Tiger's booth.

"That Indian's not helping me," Nancy was complaining that morning. "The few people who even get this far past all the junk just see him and pass me right by."

I leaned on the counter and looked into her deep green eyes. On days like this it was my favorite occupation. "Baby, I told you the summer wouldn't be an easy one. But you wanted the gift concession."

"I thought you got some people here." She was a tall, slender college girl with bleached blonde hair, trying to earn enough money for her senior year. "When do the crowds start?"

"Tonight, if we're lucky. It's the first weekend of summer, and that usually brings 'em out."

I wasn't far wrong. By nine the ballroom was half full of teenagers, and the whole length of the pier was busy. I pretty much kept hopping, supplying change to the booths, acting as an electrician when the coin-operated shooting gallery broke down, and even taking over Mike Taro's pinwheel concession for a while so he could telephone his sick wife.

It was while I was up front that Miller came looking for me.

I guess I should explain about Miller. He's an old guy of about seventy, who should have been retired a long time ago. But he and his wife run the snack bar on the pier, and I'd sorta inherited them along with the job. Miller still thought of himself as a young fellow, and he naturally figured he ought to tell me how to run that place.

"The Indian needs some paint," he told me. "For the totem pole. Says it's in his car."

"Paint!" I finished selling a great blue puff of cotton candy to a little girl, and then turned my attention to the white-haired Miller. "The paint goes on last! He's not supposed to finish the thing till Monday."

"I don't know about that. Says for you to get his paint. Or else I will. He gave me his car key."

I glanced around at the crowd. Nobody seemed interested in Mike's pinwheels or cotton candy. "Stay here. I'll go talk to him." I took the car key.

"Spotted Tiger's a damn funny name for an Indian anyway," Miller observed. "There aren't any tigers in this country. Indians were always named after bears and horses and things."

"I made up the name," I admitted reluctantly. "Tigers are big right now."

I left him among the pinwheels to wait for Mike's return and hurried back along the pier. It was near-



ly a quarter-mile long, counting the marina at the end, and the whole length seemed now to be abuzz with activity. The boats off the inland waterway were docking to discharge their casually clad wanderers, and there was even a motor launch from one of the tankers in the harbor further along.

I liked getting the seamen to land there, because they usually had money to spend. True, they were often more interested in a girl for the evening than in the two-bit amusements of the Alabaster Pier, but often they would linger to watch the high school girls who clustered around the bandstand at the end.

As it happened, I didn't make it all the way to the Chief's booth just

then. There were always a hundred and one details to be handled on a busy night, and Mrs. Miller grabbed me near her snack bar. "Just who I'm looking for! The milk machine's broken, and I've got all these customers!"

"Those sailors don't want milk," I told her. She was a whiner by nature, and I found her even harder to take than her husband.

"But I have to have it working!"

I spent five minutes checking it over and tightening a valve, before I could continue on my way to Spotted Tiger's place. He saw me coming and waved me over through the crowd. "Did you bring the paint?"

I gave him back his key. "Too soon for the paint. Start the paint like Sunday afternoon."

"What am I going to do till then?"

"A rain dance, maybe. How the hell do I know? I hired you for the weekend."

I glanced around at the crowd, and noticed a bearded seaman who looked out of place. Wherever there was a crowd, there were pickpockets, and this guy looked the type.

I drifted away from the totem carving, still keep my eye on the bearded seaman. Spotted Tiger kept his carving tools on a low table next to him, and suddenly I noticed the beard in the midst of grabbing for the Chief's wallet, on the table with the tools. I went back through the crowd and nailed him.

"O.K., mister, keep your hands off that stuff," I said.

"Huh?"

"Let me give you an escort off the pier."

The crowd was beginning to notice us, and that was something I didn't want. I hustled him off, hoping he wouldn't decide to put up a battle. Nancy Fox came out of her gift shop to help.

"What is it, trouble?" she asked.

"Not if I can help it."

The bearded guy seemed resigned to getting the rush, and maybe he decided he didn't want the cops. He didn't give me any trouble during the long walk to the street.

"You got me all wrong, mister," he said as he left.

"Sure. Find a nice quiet bar somewhere."

I went back to tell Spotted Tiger about putting his wallet away, but he'd gone to the car for his paint. I cursed under my breath and went into the little office to get a moment's quiet. The trio was really swinging, though, and the twang of the electric guitars seemed to vibrate through the flimsy walls.

Pretty soon I went back outside and chatted for a while at Nancy's gift shop. There are worse ways of making a living.

"Is that a real Indian?" some kid asked me, pointing at the Chief.

"He sure is, sonny." I left Nancy's and checked in with Mr. and Mrs. Miller. All was well with the milk machine, and the place was almost full. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad night after all.

At least that's what I thought before Mike Taro came and told me about the body.

"I gotta talk to you," Mike said, pushing through the dance floor to my side. "One of the guys just found a body out in the marina."

"A body?"

"A dead body, like."

I stiffened and thought about the police. "Drowning?"

Mike shook his head. "His throat's a mess. He was stabbed or something."

"You mean *murdered*?" I was counting lost dollars, watching the whole weekend's business go down the drain while heavy-footed detectives prowled the pier.

"Looks like it. Want to see him?"

I followed Mike in silence, edging through the crowd and working my way around the bandstand. A bunch of girls in tight pants squealed with delight as the electric guitars began to throb again, and suddenly the room seemed hot with the nearness of sweating flesh.

"Where is he?" I asked Mike, following him outdoors along the narrow pier.

"Out near the end. A couple of the boys are with him."

Finally we passed the half-score boats that were tied up at the pier and reached the place where Tommy and one of the other marina attendants stood in silence over a coat-draped figure.

"We covered him up," Tommy said. He was just a kid, and I'd hired

him out of high school for the summer months.

"Let's see." I knew the cops wouldn't want a coat over him till they'd looked things over.

"No wallet or identification," Tommy said. "I checked." He'd pulled back the coat to reveal a middle-aged man with a bloodied throat and staring eyes. It wasn't very pleasant.

"You're a regular detective, aren't you? What else did you find?"

"He's got a gun in a hip holster. It might be a gang killing."

I moved the coat just enough to see the stainless steel .38 revolver glint in the moonlight. Then I stood up, shaking my head. "He's a cop of some sort. Those stainless jobs are carried by the harbor patrol and the customs boys. Keeps the salt air from corroding the metal."

"Who do you think done it?" Mike Taro asked.

"That's for the police to figure out. You'd better phone them right away." I was thinking about the bearded seaman I'd chased out of the place. He was shaping up as a good one to lay it on, guilty or not.

"Where you going?" Mike asked, frowning as I turned away.

"I want to check the pier before the cops arrive. And you'd better get back to your pinwheels. You probably got customers hollering for them."

"Sure. That'll be the day."

I wanted to ask him what he'd been doing back here in the first

place, what the dead man had been doing here. But I had too much on my mind just then. I started for my office, then changed my mind and went to tell Nancy Fox what had happened. Somehow it seemed that she might help just then, in the way that girls often did.

An hour later the place was swarming with detectives and uniformed police, more than a simple murder would have warranted. Though no one had yet offered an identification of the dead man, I was certain by now that he was some sort of law officer. They were just looking for an excuse to close down the whole pier, and I was really worried for the first time. It wasn't my money in the thing, but I'd be out of a job fast if the Alabaster shut down. I wasn't that much of a swimmer to enjoy an unemployed summer splashing in the surf.

"Any news?" Nancy asked, coming up to me outside my little office.

"Not a thing. They've set up a table out in front and they're taking the name and address of everyone on the pier, as they leave. That should be great for business!"

"Couldn't the killer have come by boat?"

"Tommy says no boats came or left since the inboard with the merchant seamen, a couple of hours before the killing."

"Tommy didn't see anything out there?"

I shook my head. "He and the other guy were repairing a motor

for somebody. They didn't hear any boats coming or going, but anyone could have walked out there and killed the guy."

A detective motioned to me from the marina door, and I crossed the ballroom quickly. The place was almost deserted now, with all of my customers fighting for a place in the exit line.

"What now?" I asked the detective in charge, a big Irishman named Shannon.

"More questions," he said, looking grim. We were standing on the slick catwalk that led between the marina stalls, and I had the distinct impression of inbalance, as if my feet might go out from under me at any time.

"Have you identified him yet?"

"We identified him." He ignored my questioning look and said, "I want a list of everyone who works on the pier. We're making our own list of outsiders."

"Sure." I shuffled around for a cigarette, keeping one hand on the rope railing. "You think it was robbery?"

The detective eyed me questioningly. "Why should I?"

"His wallet was gone, wasn't it?"

"Maybe someone wanted it to look like robbery," Shannon paused and then said, "The dead man was Wayne Atchenson, a customs inspector for the federal government."

"It still could be robbery." I told him about the merchant seaman I'd booted out. "That guy was after

wallets. Maybe he got Atchenson's and killed him along with it."

"Do pickpockets usually kill?"

"You're the detective," I answered with a shrug. "But muggers sometimes do, and what's the difference?"

"The weapon was an odd one. Not a knife. Something with a broad-point."

"They have fish knives of all sorts in this area. And my friend the bearded seaman had one in his pocket."

But Shannon shook his head. "I knew Wayne. He'd have had his gun out first. It was still in his belt holster."

The door opened behind us and Mike Taro came in, hanging onto the ropes on both sides.

"We got trouble in there," he told me. "Old Miller's had an attack of some sort."

"That's all I need tonight!" I mumbled something to Shannon and followed Mike inside.

The ballroom was now completely deserted, and only a few stragglers remained watching Chief Spotted Tiger at work on his totem pole. He'd added a great hawk's nose near the top now, and he was chiseling away at that when he saw me.

"I need my paints from the car," he said.

"Not now." I kept walking, noticing that Nancy had closed her gift shop. Perhaps she was at the snack bar with the Millers, or further along

at the cluster of rest rooms near the middle of the pier.

"Thank heaven you've come!" Mrs. Miller sobbed, running out to meet me. "I think it's his heart."

I bent briefly over the stricken man. "Have you called an ambulance? He needs a hospital."

"It's on the way," Nancy said behind me. I hadn't even noticed her.

"How did it happen?" I asked of no one in particular.

"All the excitement, I suppose," Mrs. Miller answered. Her nervous hands were constantly in motion, running along the edges of the flowered apron she wore for work. "He just collapsed."

A siren died near the pier entrance, and a few moments later two white-coated attendants were lifting a gasping Mr. Miller onto their stretcher. I watched until the ambulance pulled away and then headed back along the pier to my office. Now the shooting gallery was closed down too and even the pin-ball machines were getting no action. The last of the night's disgruntled customers were in line to sign out with the police.

I closed the door behind me and started dialing the numbers of the owners' syndicate in New York. I figured I owed them some information for their money, at the very least. But of course the offices were closed, and even the night numbers didn't answer. Everyone was away for the long weekend. My office was suddenly very warm.

I sat at the desk for a long time, wondering what to do. As long as the murderer remained at large, the Alabaster Amusement Pier would be harassed, or maybe even closed, by the local police and the government. The murder of a customs inspector might even be a federal offense, bringing the FBI down on my head.

But maybe there was something I could do. If I was right, and the bearded seaman had killed Wayne Atchenson for his wallet, I just might be able to track him down. I left the office and found Nancy still comforting Mrs. Miller.

"I'm going to the hospital with her," she told me. "She shouldn't be there alone."

"I'd hoped you could help me."

"With what?"

I told her about the bearded man and my suspicions.

"I remember you booting him out," Nancy said. "But I didn't see him after that."

"Somebody around the neighborhood must have."

"I'll call you from the hospital." She gave me a smile.

I nodded and kept walking. Two police cars were still parked at the end of the pier, but the crowds were beginning to thin, looking for new excitement before the night passed away. I paused next to Mike's stand, where he was cleaning out the cotton candy machine and packing up the pinwheels.

"We won't be open again before next week," he predicted.

"We'd better be. I can't afford to lose a whole weekend's grosses." I turned down the street. "You going home?"

Mike nodded. "What else is there?"

"Check with Tommy before you go. Somebody will have to stay at the marina until all those boats clear out."

I headed first toward the nearest bar, a waterfront place that was a favorite with shore-leave merchant seamen. It was dingy and crowded, and rank with the odors of smoky beer at this hour. Somewhere in the midst of the bar crowd a girl laughed, and I wondered what there was left for someone like her to laugh about.

"A bearded fellow," I said to the familiar bartender. "He came off the Alabaster a couple of hours ago."

"Lots of beards in this batch. Take your pick."

I tried to remember something else about him. "He had a high forehead and a little scar about here."

The bartender shrugged. "I don't remember."

I left the place and was starting toward the next bar when something caught my eye back at the Alabaster. There was a customer buying a pinwheel at Mike's just-closing booth. His back was to me, but I was sure it was my man. And what in hell did he want with a pinwheel?

"Mike! The guy who just went



seemed to cough once and send a line of fire directly at me.

I felt the searing pain in my shoulder and realized in the same instant that I'd been shot, and then I went down, clawing at the dirty wooden floor of the pier.

I couldn't have been out for more than a minute, and when I opened my eyes I saw the detective, Shannon, bending over me.

"You okay?" he asked. "Except for the shoulder?"

I tried to move and felt the pain again. "I think so. What happened?"

"I had to shoot the crazy fool," Shannon said, and I saw the gun in his hand. "I'm afraid he's dead."

The bearded man was sprawled where he had fallen, unmoving. I leaned on Shannon's arm to get to my feet and walked over for a look.

"I didn't even know he had a gun," I said, trying not to notice the growing throb in my shoulder.

"He had the pinwheel taped to the barrel. Very effective camouflage in this dim light." Then, "We'll have to take care of that shoulder. It's only a crease, but it must be painful."

"A bit."

He led me out to the car, barking orders to a couple of running cops on the way.

"I guess you were right about his being involved," Shannon told me.

"But what did he come back for?"

They'd stripped off my shirt and

inside! A beard, little scar on the forehead?"

He stared at me, puzzled. "Yeah."

"Didn't you tell him the place was closed?"

"He said he had business."

I sprinted onto the pier, ignoring his questions. Only the night lights were lit now, and large areas of the place lay deep in shadow. I didn't see him ahead, but I knew he must be there. Finally I saw him, in the doorway of the darkened snack bar.

"Hold it, mister," I shouted.

He stepped out of the doorway directly in front of me. The pinwheel was in his right hand, waist high, turning slowly in the breeze. I remembered thinking that somewhere, far down at the end, a door must be open. Then the pinwheel

were applying first aid to the shoulder.

"I guess I can tell you a little of what we know," Shannon said. "Atchenson was trying to intercept a small shipment of pure heroin—only a few ounces, but worth a couple of thousand dollars wholesale and much more after it's been cut. The dead seaman, a fellow named Peskie, has been bringing packets of heroin in at various points along the coast. Tonight he landed here at the Alabaster, and Atchenson was waiting for him."

"And got killed for his trouble."

Shannon nodded. "But the stuff's not on him. He made his contact."

"Not on my pier," I protested.

"Where else? I think he passed the stuff and was coming back now for his money."

That bothered me and I thought about it. "Someone on the pier? But who?"

"Peskie was at the snack bar. Old Miller had a very convenient attack earlier in the evening that got him out of here fast without being searched."

"You're crazy!"

The detective shrugged. "Maybe."

They finished applying the medicated gauze and tape to my shoulder and I slipped back into my blood-stained shirt. All of a sudden I had a crazy idea, and the more I thought about it the less crazy it seemed. It was like being at the race track and weighing the odds on

the favorite against his past performance chart.

"Come on!" I told Shannon.

He frowned but followed along. Maybe he had more confidence in me than I did just then. I was only a gambler playing a long shot, but the more I thought about it, the better the odds looked.

Far out on the pier, near the deserted ballroom, Chief Spotted Tiger was still chipping away at his totem pole, working under a single bright overhead light.

I stepped around the remains of a melted ice cream cone and said, "Hello, Chief. How are you coming?"

He looked up at me. "All done."

I glanced over my shoulder at Shannon. "I may be way off base, but I think I can give you a half-dozen good reasons why Spotted Tiger here must have killed Atchenson. And why the missing heroin is inside his damned totem pole."

Spotted Tiger looked up at me with his clouded eyes. "You must be kidding."

"Let's try it for size," I said, talking fast while my courage lasted. "First, Peskie was making a drop here tonight, but previous drops had been at other locations. So the contact wasn't a regular employee of the Pier. Tiger here is our only temporary worker."

"The contact could have been a customer," Shannon argued.

"But then Peskie wouldn't have come back just now to get his mon-

ey, when he knew all the customers were gone."

"All right."

"Second, Peskie couldn't have returned to the marina after I booted him out. And he hardly would have killed Atchenson and then tried to lift a wallet instead of escaping. So Peskie didn't kill the customs man, and therefore his contact must have done it. Third, since the customs man didn't know the contact earlier, he must have been the bearded Peskie pass the stuff. I was watching Peskie myself, and I thought I saw him taking Spotted Tiger's wallet. Actually, I was watching the packet of heroin being passed in the wallet."

The Indian had stopped his carving and was staring at us.

"Go on," Shannon said.

"Fourth, Spotted Tiger was away from his booth at exactly the time Atchenson was being killed. I thought he was getting some paint from his car, but when he returned he still didn't have the paint. And if he'd have gone toward his car or even toward the rest rooms, I'd have passed him along the way."

I paused for breath and then hurried on. "Fifth, Spotted Tiger had the totem pole finished before the killing, but later he'd added a large hawk's nose. *Added* it, not carved it out. Why? Only to hide a hollowed-out spot where the packet of heroin could be secreted. Let's have a look, Tiger."

But he was covering the wooden

beak with his now empty left hand.

"You said six reasons."

"So I did. Sixth, who could have killed Atchenson, stabbed him in the throat faster than he could draw his gun? Not Mike Taro with his bum leg on that slippery marina. Not Tommy, who had an alibi with the other marina attendant. Not Miller with his bum heart. Or his elderly wife. Or Nancy or any other girl. Not Peskie, for the reason I've already stated and also because he would more likely have used his gun. No, our murderer used a weapon already in his hand, something Atchenson saw but didn't really notice when he called him out to the marina to question him. A broad-pointed weapon, remember? Like Spotted Tiger's chisel!"

He was faster than I'd dreamed possible. The chisel came up at my throat, and for a split second I knew now how Atchenson had felt.

But then Shannon was on him, toppling him to the floor.

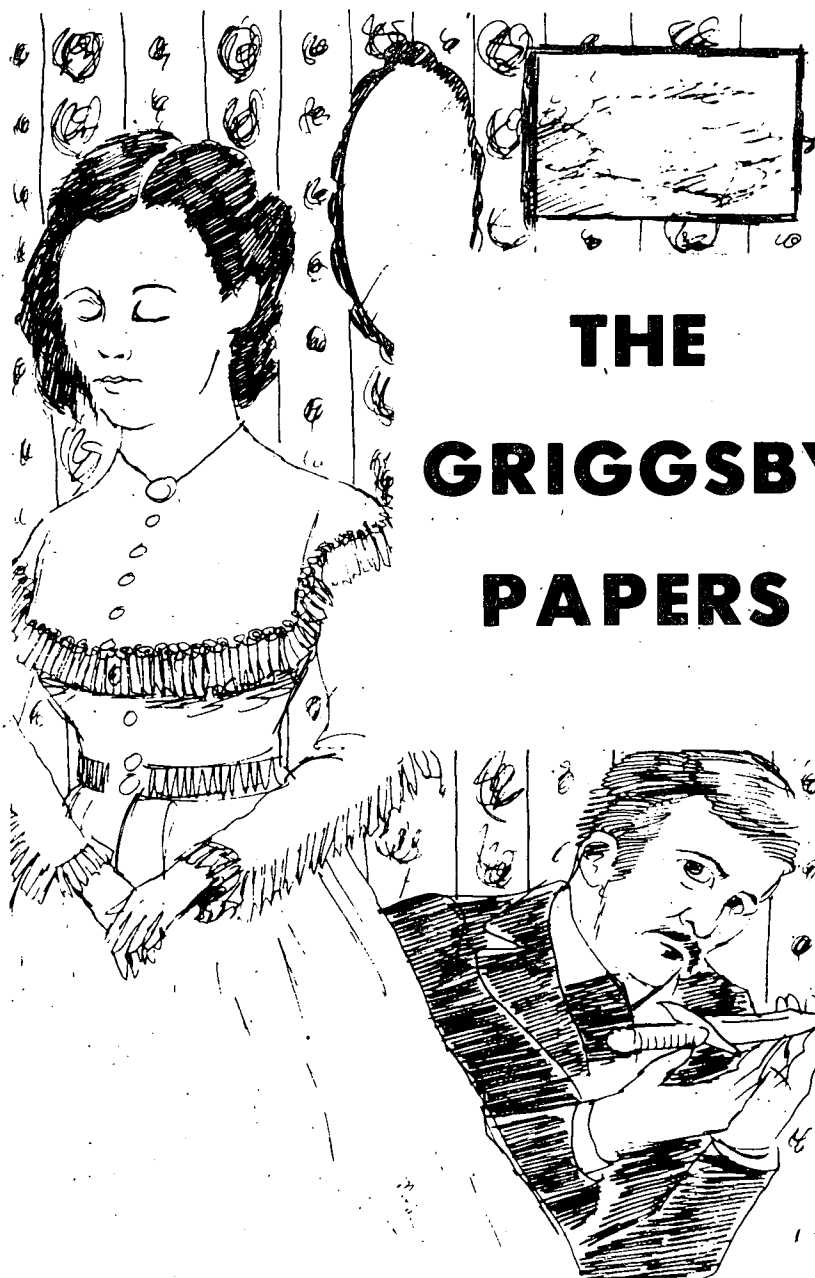
Nancy was opening her gift shop the next morning as I passed by.

"You had a busy night," she said. "Busy."

"What about the contest? What time did he finish the totem pole?"

I thought about that. "I guess he'll never finish it now. We'll have to dream up another contest."

The place was filling early, even for a weekend. Maybe the murder was good publicity after all. I walked out toward the front, to see how Mike Taro was doing.



THE GRIGGSBY PAPERS

Out of the dusty past the unbelievable story unfolded before my eyes. I had solved a murder that had baffled the world—fifty years too late for Justice!

by **JACK RITCHIE**



I SERGEANT HENRY H. BUCKLE, Homicide, signed in at my usual time and then marched resolutely down the long corridor to the records division.

When I entered that department, twelve civilian clerks looked up. Some of them suppressed their grins, others did not.

I ignored them all and continued through the large room to a door at the farther end.

I selected a key from my ring and tried it on the lock. It was the wrong key, of course. The first one usually is.

I heard a snicker from the room behind me. I turned and glared.

No one dared to meet my eye.

I tried another key and this time unlocked the door. I switched on the inside light and walked down the dim narrow corridor to the next door. I unlocked that one too and this time descended some steps and made my way through a maze of boxes, spider webs, and assorted beams and framings until I reached the last door.

I unlocked it and turned on the lights.

As usual, I saw a medium-sized

room filled with a variety of dusty filing cabinets and discarded office furniture.

This room was my new assignment, my job, my Siberia.

It had all come about when I made the tactical error of arresting the mayor's son for drunken driving. I am not in the traffic bureau, but his car had been swaying and weaving on the road before me, and a policeman should not close his eyes to something like that, no matter what his department.

When the administrative smoke cleared, I found myself assigned to this room in the bowels of police headquarters. My job, according to hard-breathing Chief Milliken, was to review old records of murders, all of them at least twenty-five years old and unsolved.

I could take my time, he grimly assured me, no rush at all. I had the suspicion that he meant I could look forward to at least a year down here, that being the length of time the mayor's son had had his license suspended.

I hung my hat on a slightly askew hatrack and faced the filing cabinets. What would it be today? I wandered down the dusty aisles until I reached a brown wooden cabinet. It looked quite old.

I opened one of the drawers and selected one of the marbled cardboard containers at random. I took it to the desk I'd salvaged from the discarded furniture and sat down carefully on a rather unpendable

swivel chair. I studied the faded handwriting on the identification tag of the container.

It read simply *Dr. Samuel Nicholson. 1862.*

I removed a thick sheaf of handwritten papers. It was written before the days of official forms and the typewriter, and that almost turned me off immediately.

The papers had yellowed and most of them were stiff and fragile, or splintered here and there. The ink had faded to a rusty red.

I began reading.

The murder of Dr. Samuel Nicholson had occurred in the home of one Julius Darby early in the morning of May 17, 1863, or very late on the previous night.

His body had been found on the floor of the drawing room at seven in the morning by one of the maids, a Kate O'Reilly.

The three-story Darby house was quite a large structure, especially for those times and this part of the country, when a twelve-by-ten-foot log cabin or a one-room frame shack was still more often than not the common man's castle.

In 1863 our city was hardly more than a village of some 1,500 inhabitants, with the Darby house situated two miles from its outskirts and more than a quarter of a mile from its nearest neighbor.

At the time of the murder the household, excluding the servants, had consisted of Julius Darby, his wife Melanie, their two children,

Emma, age twenty-four, and Captain Oswald Darby, age twenty-two, and of course, Dr. Nicholson, their house guest.

Kate O'Reilly's screams had awakened the household and Julius Darby had immediately sent one of his stable hands to the village for what was then the law, Sheriff Artemus Griggsby.

Artemus Griggsby?

Could that have been the same Artemus Griggsby who founded our city's public library system and remained its chief librarian for sixty-two years, dying quietly at the age of ninety-two while reading *The Mill on the Floss*?

Almost all of the sheets of paper before me were in Griggsby's handwriting.

I read his words and put myself in his shoes.

Dr. Kearney, our coroner, and I (wrote Griggsby) arrived at Darby's residence at approximately nine in the morning and were met at the large front doors by Julius Darby himself.

He led us immediately to the drawing room where lay the body of Dr. Nicholson.

I would have been content to view the corpse from a distance, but Julius Darby was at my elbow and so I approached much closer than I preferred.

Dr. Nicholson appeared to have been in his early fifties. He seemed to have been stabbed a number of times.



The murder process had been quite gory, both for the victim and the room, and very likely for the murderer. Dr. Nicholson lay fully clothed, but wearing a dressing gown. The weapon used to kill him, a thick-bladed Bowie knife, lay beside the body where the murderer had evidently dropped it.

Dr. Kearney knelt beside the body and began his careful examination.

I waited a few moments and then asked, "How long has he been dead?"

Dr. Kearney shrugged. "Probably since midnight, give or take. He's had his spell of *rigor mortis*."

I turned to Darby. "When was Dr. Nicholson last seen alive?" I asked.

"Last night, when we all retired at about ten o'clock."

Julius Darby is a burly man of commanding presence and the owner of considerable real estate in the village, not to mention thousands

of acres of timberland in the counties surrounding. He also owns the town's brewery and its distillery.

"Evidently Nicholson heard a prowler some time after he retired to his room," Darby said. "He came down to investigate and the prowler seized the knife from its display space on the wall and stabbed poor Nicholson to death." Darby indicated an open French window. "He must have fled out that way."

I stepped outside. The veranda was tiled and beyond it lay grass, both of which eliminated the possibility of finding footprints.

I returned to the room and approached the knife. It had been thoroughly gouted with blood, which now appeared to have dried on the blade and its handle.

"Is there anything missing?" I asked.

"Not as far as I can tell," Darby said. "Nicholson must have gotten to the prowler before he could pack anything away."

I took off my glasses and wiped them. "I'll need something—a small box, perhaps—for the knife. Evidence, you know."

"Of course," Darby said. He pulled the bell rope and a uniformed maid appeared.

"Kate," he said, "would you get Sheriff Griggsby a box big enough to contain the knife?"

Her eyes went to the Bowie knife on the floor and she shuddered. "Yes, sir."

"Just one moment," I said. "Are

you the person who discovered the body?"

She had black hair and light eyes which regarded me warily. "Yes, sir. 'Tis me job to open the drapes in the rooms downstairs every mornin'."

"And you screamed when you found the body?"

She regarded me with a trace of scorn.

"Now what else would I be doin' when I discover a body?"

She left the room and when she returned she handed me a wooden box approximately twelve inches long and four inches square at the ends.

I knelt down beside the murder weapon and gingerly put it in the box. Yes, the blood was quite dry. I slid the cover shut and stood up. "How long has Dr. Nicholson been your house guest?"

Darby rubbed his jaw. "He came here in April of 1862."

I'm afraid I blinked. "He's been your house guest for more than a year?"

"Well, not continuously. There was that period from about the middle of August until November when Nicholson joined the Union army. He and my son Oswald were in the same regiment, you know. Left the same day and came back together the same day."

"The regiment returned?"

"No. Just Dr. Nicholson and Oswald. Oswald was wounded at An-

tietam, you know. Has a medical discharge."

"You and Dr. Nicholson have been friends for a long time?"

"Actually I never saw him before he showed up on that day in April of '62. Relative of my wife's, though. Cousin a few times removed, I believe."

"Mr. Darby," I said, "I'm afraid that I will have to search the house."

He frowned. "What on earth for?"

"It seems evident that whoever killed Dr. Nicholson must have gotten himself and his clothes quite bloody in the process."

Darby blinked. "Now see here, you don't suspect that someone in this house killed Nicholson?" He pointed out the open French door again. "It was a prowler."

"Very likely," I said. "However, it is normal procedure to search the environs of a murder thoroughly."

He rubbed his neck. "Well, if it's normal procedure, I suppose I can't stand in the way."

I enlisted the aid of Dr. Kearney in searching the house. Frankly, I expected to find nothing. Two men alone attempting such a project in a house the size of Darby's was rather futile to begin with. But it had to be done, for form, if nothing else.

After a half an hour, we paused to rest.

"Kearney," I said, "you and Dr. Nicholson being of the same profession, what do you know about him?"

"Practically nothing. He never opened an office here. Never even met him personally, but—" He paused.

"But what?"

"I hear he had quite an eye for the ladies."

My attention was caught by a daguerreotype on the fireplace mantle. It pictured a mustachioed, but still obviously young man in the uniform of a cavalry officer. "Is that Captain Oswald Darby?"

Kearney nodded. He pulled a cigar from his pocket and bit off the end. "Ever hear of Enos Stucker?"

"No."

"One of my patients now. Formerly a trooper in Captain Oswald Darby's regiment. Stucker lost a leg at Antietam. He can't seem to remember seeing the good captain anywhere around while the bullets were flying."

"A battlefield is a large and disordered place."

"So I hear. But I just thought I'd mention it."

Dr. Kearney and I finished our search without discovering anything which might relate to the murder of Dr. Nicholson.

I then determined to interview other members of the family singly.

I found Captain Oswald Darby in the library, gazing in a melancholy fashion out of the window.

He was somewhat slight of frame and delicately featured. He wore a civilian suit, but an army greatcoat

was draped about his shoulders. A cavalrymans plumed hat lay on a nearby table.

He turned, leaning slightly on a cane.

"You are no longer in the army?" I asked.

He sighed. "Not any more. Invalided out, you know. Antietam."

I indicated the cane. "You were wounded in the leg?"

He shook his head. "No." He indicated the region of a kidney. "Right about here."

"I noticed the cane."

"The wound hasn't healed properly yet and it sort of pulls on my leg. I need the cane."

I turned our conversation to the murder. "You heard nothing during the night? The noise of a prowler, for instance?"

"No. I slept quite soundly. Went to bed at about ten when all the others did. And then I was wakened in the morning by that dreadful scream."

"You rushed downstairs and found Dr. Nicholson dead?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, everyone else seemed to be rushing about, so I thought it would be more intelligent for me to remain in my room instead of adding to the confusion."

"Have you seen Dr. Nicholson's body?"

He gazed into the distance. "No. I prefer to remember him as he was."

"Do you know if Dr. Nicholson had any enemies?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Enemies? Of course not. He was a friend to all. A gentleman, a scholar, a soldier."

I questioned Oswald further and discovered that it too was his opinion that the murderer was a prowler.

I requested that, for the record, he write a statement regarding his whereabouts on the night of the murder and give it to me before I left the Darby house.

When I left the library, I found the maid, Kate O'Reilly, polishing furniture in one of the side rooms.

"Where could I find Mrs. Darby?"

She shrugged. "In the music room, perhaps." She seemed about to leave the room.

"Just one moment, miss."

"What is it you want?"

"Just a few questions."

"If it's about any of the family, I will not answer."

"You are close to the family?"

"Not particularly. But as long as they pay me wages, I'll not say anything against them."

"Do you regard Dr. Nicholson as a member of the family?"

She hesitated. "I suppose not."

"Did Dr. Nicholson have any enemies?"

She studied me coldly. "You're an unlikely man to be sheriff."

I flushed slightly. "Madam, I was elected by the townspeople."

"Aye," she said. "That I know."



And do you remember Timothy McSweeney?"

"Timothy McSweeney? Of course. He was my opponent."

She smiled briefly. "And me uncle, he is."

Ah, yes. Now I could understand her antagonism.

When I arrived in this part of the country six months ago, penniless, I quickly discovered that there was no great demand for literacy in the village.

I was somewhat desperate for a situation and so when I discovered that the late sheriff had been buried as the result of acute alcoholism and left his position vacant in hardly any time I quickly nominated myself for the job.

Mine would have been the only name on the ballot except that at the last moment one Timothy Mc-

Sweeney, bartender, entered the race.

I won handily, however, possibly because I made no speeches, but more probably because two-thirds of the population consisted of transplanted New Englanders and Germans, who considered the other third, the Irish, as hopeless newcomers.

"Miss O'Reilly," I said, "I'm asking everyone in the house, including the servants, to write a statement concerning his or her whereabouts last night."

Kate O'Reilly's eyes narrowed as she stared at me.

"It is just procedure," I said defensively. A sudden awkward thought occurred to me. Could she read and write? "Or perhaps I could write it for you later and you could affix your mark?"

She flushed slightly and gathered her polishing materials. "I'll show you to the music room."

When I entered that room, I found Mrs. Melanie Darby half-reclining on a couch. Her features were a delicate cameo and her figure quite small. She could hardly have been five feet tall. Beside her, on a small round table, I saw smelling salts.

She smiled wanly. "Sheriff Griggsby, I suppose you have questions to ask me?"

She appeared to have a slight southern accent. I quickly corrected that. A *border* accent.

I found myself bowing slightly.

"Did you hear anything at all unusual last night, Mrs. Darby?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not, sheriff."

"You are a heavy sleeper?"

"No, quite the contrary. Therefore I usually find it necessary to take sleeping powders, as I did last night. I slept soundly."

"And you were wakened by the screams?"

"Yes."

I felt the next question might be a little indelicate, but I thought it necessary to ask. "You and your husband share the same bedroom, of course?"

She hesitated for a moment. "No. I'm a very restless sleeper and I feel that it's only fair to Julius that I do not disturb his rest. We have adjoining bedrooms."

"I understand that Dr. Nicholson was a relative of yours?"

"Yes. My second cousin, twice removed."

"You are not from this region?"

She smiled faintly. "Hardly anyone is. I was born and reared in Nashville, Tennessee." She studied me. "But why are all these questions necessary? Surely it must be obvious that an intruder broke into the house during the night. Dr. Nicholson heard him and went downstairs to investigate. Unfortunately the intruder killed him."

I nodded. "I'm just wondering why only Dr. Nicholson heard the intruder. His bedroom is on the second floor at the rear of the house,

isn't it? Quite the farthest of all from the drawing room?"

Her fingers touched the smelling salts. "He might have come down for some other reason. Restlessness, perhaps." She looked up. "I suppose you would like to talk to my daughter Emma too?"

"If I may?"

Mrs. Darby left the room and a few minutes later Emma Darby appeared alone.

"Yes, Sheriff Griggsby?"

I understood that she was twenty-four, yet she seemed several years older than that. She was somewhat above average height for a woman and of somewhat stalwart build. Her dark hair was severely combed and she had light gray eyes.

I suppose most people would have described her as plain, and yet I thought she was not totally unattractive.

I came to the point. "This morning you were wakened by the screams?"

"No. I was already awake. When I heard Kate scream, I came directly downstairs. As a matter of fact, I was the first person to reach her."

"And you found Dr. Nicholson dead?"

"I assumed that he was dead. At least it appeared that way to me."

"Did you touch him or disturb anything?"

"I touched nothing."

"One of the French windows leading to the rear grounds was open?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Are those doors latched from the inside at night?"

"Yes. Unless last night someone forgot. Or perhaps the intruder entered the house from some other way and left by way of the French window."

"So you too think it was the work of an intruder?"

"Of course. How could it have been anyone else?"

"I presume everyone liked Dr. Nicholson?"

"Certainly. As far as I know, he had no enemies."

It seemed to me that though physically Emma resembled her father, there was something in her eyes which clearly suggested her mother, but I could not quite put my finger on it.

When I finished my questioning, I tried a moment of small talk. I indicated the two large musical instruments in the room. "Do you play the piano? Or the harp?"

"No," Emma said. "None of us is musically inclined, but every large house needs a music room, don't you think?"

She smiled rather nicely.

I finished reading the last of Sheriff Griggsby's sheets and then sat back.

Yes, here it was. Everything Griggsby had been able to assemble on the death of Dr. Nicholson—his observations and the statements from the occupants of the Darby

house and grounds. Kate O'Reilly was no servant who did not know and write. Of the fourteen Griggsby's employ, only the chief room and the cook were literate.

And what had been the net result of all of this?

It was the verdict of the coroner's jury that Dr. Samuel Nicholson had met his death at the hands of a person or persons unknown.

And Sheriff Griggsby had concurred.

I pondered about that knife. Do you suppose it might be in the police museum?

For that matter, did we have a police museum?

I glanced at my watch. Just about lunch time anyway. I left the papers on my desk and wended my way back to the records division.

I borrowed the use of a phone and asked the switchboard operator to connect me with the police museum.

I thought I heard her asking someone if we had such a place and then she made the connection.

I listened to at least a dozen buzzes, but no one picked up the phone.

I got the operator again and had her connect me with the personnel bureau.

The chief clerk, Louis Rupert, answered.

"This is Sergeant Henry H. Buckle," I said. "Who has charge of the police museum?"

"Just a second, Henry. I'll have to look it up."

After a while, he got back on the line. "Nobody. It's closed up."

I frowned. "I'd like to get inside for a while. Who has the key?"

"I guess I have. It must be around here somewhere."

"I'll be right over."

When I walked into the personnel bureau only Rupert, who is a civilian, appeared to be about. Apparently everyone else had gone out to lunch.

He grinned. "How are things in the center of the earth, Henry?"

"Did you find the key?"

He handed me a small wooden identification paddle to which was attached a ring of keys. "One of these should take care of it. There used to be a full-time custodian for the museum, but his job got eliminated in a budget cut and he never did get put back on. We open it up only on demand now and come to think about it, the last time that happened was two years ago when some visiting Japanese detectives wanted to go through. Looking for anything in particular?"

"Police business," I said firmly. "By the way, where is the police museum?"

"On the fourth floor. It's in a small corridor at the end of the east wing. The number's on the paddle."

I took the elevator to the fourth floor and finally found an opaque door with the lettering *police museum* on it.

I unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The room was quite chilly, the heat evidently having been turned off.

I wandered slowly through the aisles of display cases. Here was exhibited the paraphernalia of crime, which seemed to consist principally of weapons—rifles, shotguns, handguns, various cutlery, bludgeons, ropes, and what have you.

The displays seemed to be arranged in order of date and so I made my way to the earliest exhibit.

It was a saw-toothed bread knife used to cut the throat of one Alonzo Burke in 1871.

1871? That was the year the police department was organized, wasn't it? Prior to that the sheriff had been the law.

But I wanted 1863.

I noticed that the last display case had several wide drawers just below waist level.

I pulled at the double handles, but the drawers were locked. I tried the keys Rupert had given me and one of the smaller ones fitted and turned the lock.

I pulled open the top drawer. It was approximately four feet wide and deep, filled with a potpourri of bundles, boxes, and the like, all of which looked and smelled strongly of age.

I recognized Griggsby's handwriting on the labels of a number of them. Evidently when the museum had been formed, all items pre-dat-

ing the police department had been consigned to these drawers.

I singled out a box approximately a foot long and four inches square at the end. A faded yellow card had been glued to the top of it and once again I identified Sheriff Griggsby's handwriting. The words were economical. *Dr. Samuel Nicholson. May 17, 1863.*

I pulled open the box and, yes, there it was—the Bowie knife that had evidently killed Dr. Nicholson.

The blade was quite wide, with a large handle and—

I stared.

What was this?

I brought the box to better light at one of the windows.

Amazing.

There they were, an almost perfect set of fingerprints on the handle of the knife. Evidently the blood in which they had been made had dried and in effect preserved them.

So here we had a nearly perfect set of the murderer's fingerprints. If Nicholson's murder had occurred in modern times, it would have been a simple enough process to uncover the identity of his murderer, but in those days . . .

Could they possibly be Sheriff Griggsby's prints, made when he picked up the knife? No. He had mentioned that the blood was already dry when he touched the murder weapon.

I found myself rubbing my jaw.

When I left and locked the police museum, I took the box and the

knife it contained with me. I went downstairs to Homicide and checked out one of the fingerprint kits.

I had had some experience with fingerprints in my initial police training and I thought I could still at least determine whether two prints were identical if they were placed side by side.

Back in the bowels of the building, seated before the Dr. Nicholson case papers, I went to work very carefully.

Natural latent prints made in 1863 would long ago have disappeared, of course. What I was looking for were the prints made by ink-stained fingers, visible, or almost visible, to the eye.

On the very first page I treated, I found a surprisingly good thumb print. I compared it to the thumb print on the murder weapon. They did not match.

I stared at the print on the sheet of paper again and then frowned. Too perfect. Almost fresh.

I inked my thumb and made a print next to it.

They matched.

I flushed slightly. My own print. Probably there'd be one or more on every sheet I'd handled. I'd have to watch that.

I made a complete set of my own prints on a piece of paper for future comparison and then went back to work. I discovered and eliminated seven of my own prints before I came to a strange print faintly inked

on a page in Sheriff Griggsby's handwriting.

I compared it to the ones on the knife.

They did not match.

Well, I thought, that definitely eliminates the sheriff.

When I had read the Nicholson file for the first time, I had gained the impression that it held a multitude of inky fingerprints.

A closer examination now proved disappointing. There were numerous smudges, but fingerprints were rare. The edge of the hand was a popular item, with the palm coming next. I even discovered what I believed to be an elbow print.

When I finished going through the stack of papers, I sighed.

I had a full complement of what were almost certainly Griggsby's prints—he was a literate, though messy, writer—but I had uncovered none other.

The only pages not in Griggsby's handwriting were the simple statements of Julius Darby, his wife, their two children, the chief groom, and the head cook, and they did not yield a single fingerprint.

My eye fell to the statement written by Captain Oswald Darby. He stated that he had gone to be at approximately ten o'clock on the night of the murder and that he slept soundly until he was wakened by the scream of the maid discovering the body. He did not mention that the scream did not draw him out of his room.

He stated further that he knew of no one who bore Dr. Nicholson the slightest ill feeling. It was his opinion that Dr. Nicholson had heard the intruder during the night, had gone downstairs to investigate, and in so doing had encountered the prowler, who stabbed him to death.

I examined the writing under a magnifying glass. Quite a distinctive penmanship, the words slanting sharply to the left. Yes, Captain Darby was left-handed. You could see that his palm moved over the words he'd just written and slightly fuzzed most of them.

I blinked.

But the fingerprints on the murder weapon were those of the right hand.

That eliminated Captain Oswald Darby as a murder suspect.

Unless, for some reason, he switched hands and—

I shook my head firmly. No. There lies madness. For the time being, at least, Captain Oswald Darby was out of the picture.

A thought came to me. Suppose Dr. Nicholson's murderer really was a prowler? Some stranger, long dead and buried who knows where?

The thought was somehow depressing.

I glanced at my watch. Way past lunch time.

I left the Nicholson papers where they were, but I stuffed the murder weapon and its box into my topcoat pocket. It was unlikely that anyone would come down here, but if he

did, I didn't want him handling the knife.

I stopped in the records division on the way out and asked one of the clerks for the state's latest Blue Book.

Our state's Blue Book is published—and largely unread—yearly and contains innumerable statistics and other data relating to the state's industry, agriculture, history, geography, and other allied subjects.

I was rather curious as to whether the Darby name might appear in some footnote of history. After all, Julius Darby appeared to have been an important man—economically, at least—in his time.

I turned to the index and found three Darby references.

I turned to page seventy-eight and was astonished to discover that Captain Oswald Darby had been the governor of our state from 1884 to 1886. His brief biography indicated that the captain—the Hero of Antietam—had been elected as a Republican and served one term.

I further learned, on page 128, that his son, Major George Darby—the Hero of San Juan Hill—had also served as a one-term governor from 1910 to 1912.

I felt a bit guilty, not having known that, but consoled my intellect with the fact that probably ninety-nine out of a hundred citizens of our state didn't either.

I turned to the third reference, page 171, and acquired the additional information that the Julius



Darby House & Museum was one of our state's historical homes.

I copied down its address and then went to the police garage to claim my car.

After driving half a mile, I again remembered that I'd eaten nothing since breakfast. I parked and walked down the street until I found a small restaurant. I took a seat in one of the booths.

A waitress appeared. She was a small woman, possibly not even five feet tall. I stared at her hands, poised with pad and pencil.

But of course.

How was it Griggsby had described Mrs. Melnaie Darby? "... her figure quite small. She could hardly have been five feet tall."

And small people have small hands, don't they? Just as this waitress did?

I pulled the box out of my topcoat and slid back the cover. I examined the fingerprints on the hilt again.

Yes, they were definitely *not* made by a small hand. I would have called

ed it at least medium. And perhaps, for its time, it might even have been classified as large. After all, people were smaller in those days and so what might pass for a medium hand today might have been regarded as a large hand yesterday.

But whatever the classification, medium or large, it definitely was not made by a small hand.

And Mrs. Melanie Darby, being a small woman, would have a small hand and so therefore did not murder Dr. Nicholson.

I rubbed my neck. But on the other hand, was it possible for a small person to have medium or even large hands?

I became aware that the waitress had disappeared and that a very young policeman stood in her place.

"What are you figuring to do with that knife, mister?"

Where had he come from? Probably he'd been having a snack at the counter.

He smiled tightly. "Did you have any ideas of holding up this place?"

I blinked. "With a knife?"

He nodded with surer knowledge. "It's been done."

I thought it proper to identify myself and reached for my wallet.

His hand had been on the butt of his service revolver and now I suddenly stared into the muzzle of a Police .38.

"Don't move," he ordered, his voice breaking slightly.

I smiled reassuringly. "It's quite

all right, officer. I am also a member—"

"Shut up and stand up," he ordered. "And put the palms of your hands against that wall."

I saw that the safety of his pistol was off and his trigger finger appeared faintly white.

I rose. Why did these things always happen to me? I put my palms against the wall and spread my feet approximately a yard from its base.

"It is my duty to inform you of your rights," he said. "You have the right to remain silent. If you choose not to remain silent—"

My temper was a bit frayed. "First you search me. If you find any reason to formally arrest me, then you inform me of my rights."

"Shut up." He searched me and found my service revolver. "Ah, ha. What have we here?"

"If you'll look in my wallet—"

"Trying to bribe me?"

"No, you idiot. Look at my identification."

"Hand me your wallet."

"How can I do that when I'm leaning against the wall like this?"

"Well, stand up straight."

"I suppose you want me to take the money out of my wallet first?"

He nodded. "I was coming to that."

I removed my folding money and handed the wallet to him.

There was some silence as he digested the information and the presence of a badge in my wallet.

"Sergeant Henry H. Buckle? *The Sergeant Henry H. Buckle?*"

Evidently he'd heard of me.

"Yes," I said emphatically.

He grinned feebly. "I guess I was a little hasty."

I realized that I was the center of all eyes in the restaurant. I dislike such situations intensely.

I retrieved my wallet and the revolver, put the knife back into the box and the box back into my top-coat pocket.

I tried to think of some stiff departing words, but there were none. I stalked out of the restaurant with as much dignity as I could muster.

I found my car and drove to the address of the Julius Darby House Museum.

When it had been built, the Darby House Museum.

When it had been built, the Darby house had been a quarter of a mile from the nearest other habitation, but now the area was a quiet residential section in the older part of the city.

I found a parking spot for my car and walked up to the large front door. I found a sign to one side indicating that the Darby House Museum was open on weekdays from two until five in the afternoon from April until the end of October.

I found the door locked.

I tried the brass knocker and waited patiently. Then I used the knocker again.

Finally I heard a bolt being drawn

and the door opened slightly. A slight gray-haired woman in her sixties peered out. "Yes?"

"Isn't the museum open today?"

She seemed a little startled by the question. "What group are you with?"

Automatically I looked back over my shoulder, but I was alone. "I'm not with any group."

She frowned. "You mean you came here alone? Just off the street?"

"Well . . . yes."

She regarded me condescendingly. "People come here in groups, you know. Groups of students or groups from women's clubs. We have quite a few of those. They make appointments beforehand and I guide them through the house. Nobody comes here alone just off the street."

I pointed out to her that the sign at the front door mentioned nothing at all about groups and I had no intention of joining one just to get permission to tour the house.

She remained reluctant. "But I've never had anybody come in just off the street."

"Madam," I said firmly. "Will I be allowed to tour this house or do I write a scathing letter to the *Journal*?"

The possibility of publicity shook her. "Very well. You may enter, but it is against all tradition."

I stepped into the hallway.

To my right open double doors revealed a large high-ceilinged room,

one corner of which was devoted to a desk, a typewriter, and a filing cabinet. A name plate on the desk indicated that a H. E. Griggsby was the curator.

"Is Mr. Griggsby in?" I asked.

She smiled briefly. "I am H. E. Griggsby."

I followed as she led the way through a set of doors on the other side of the hall.

"This is the drawing room," she said.

It had obviously been restored to its original condition and period. The dark and heavy furniture gleamed with wax. There was a huge marble fireplace at one end of the room.

My eyes went to the polished floor. So this was where the murder had occurred.

I knelt down and examined a portion of the floor. No stains, but then, of course, one could not expect any after more than a hundred years.

Miss Griggsby watched me, a bit wide-eyed.

I got to my feet and dusted the knees of my trousers. "This is where the murder occurred. Right in this room."

She stared. "Murder? What murder?"

"The murder of Dr. Nicholson on May 17, 1863."

She did not appear to be convinced. "Well, I don't know anything about that. It isn't in my talk."

There were two oil portraits above the fireplace mantel. The copper plates beneath identified them as

Julius Darby (1808-79) and Melanie Darby (1819-1902).

Julius Darby had a commanding eye and a determined jaw. He was the stuff of which our pioneer ancestors were made—the successful ones, at least.

And Melanie Darby. Yes, delicate, aristocratic features. A cameo.

I noticed that display cases here and there against the walls contained photographs and various other family memorabilia.

I singled out a daguerreotype. The card beneath identified the group as that of Julius Darby, his wife Melanie, daughter Emma, and son Captain Oswald Darby — the Hero of Antietam.

Captain Oswald Darby wore his hair long and, of course, he had those silky mustachios. Two buttons of his uniform were undone in the casual, relaxed, and absolutely obligatory fashion of the day. On his head swaggered a cavalry officer's plumed hat. He was further equipped with spurred high boots and a sheathed saber, the end of which appeared to drag on the ground.

Emma Darby was not quite heavy, but definitely solid, and taller than her brother. A stern expression characterized her pose and her straight hair was parted exactly down the middle.

Julius and Melanie sat on chairs, their children standing.

I studied Melanie's hands. Yes, very small. Actually tiny.



My eyes went to Julius Darby's hands, especially the right one.

The ring finger was missing.

I read the card beneath again. The daguerreotype had been taken in August of 1962, fully eight or nine months before the murder.

Evidently some time in his life, and certainly before the death of Dr. Nicholson, Julius Darby had lost the ring finger of his right hand.

However, the fingerprints on the Bowie knife clearly indicated that the murderer possessed all of the fingers of his right hand.

I turned and somewhat startled Miss Griggsby in the process.

"And now, if you will," I said,

"you may conduct me through the rest of the house."

As she guided me through the rooms, she delivered her tour talk—somewhat nervously, I thought. She covered considerable of the Darby family history, including that of the two governors.

Half an hour later, we were on the third floor.

I interrupted her. "Are you by any chance related to Artemus Griggsby, the father of our public library system?"

She seemed surprised that I would know. "Why, yes. He was one of my great-grandfathers. I had four, you know. The histories of the Darbys and the Griggsbys have touched during the years. I think the fact that I'm a Griggsby had more than a little to do with my being made curator." She smiled briefly. "The Darby Foundation is thinking of creating a Griggsby room here. We have quite a collection of great-grandfather's papers, correspondence, journals, and so forth."

"You have Artemus Griggsby's journals?"

She nodded. "He kept a daily record of his life, starting at the age of twelve."

"I must see them."

She was distinctly uneasy. "It isn't a part of the tour. And besides, they're in boxes and crates in the storage room."

"Where is the storage room?"

I'm afraid I sounded a bit imperious.

She swallowed with difficulty and then led the way, looking back over her shoulder now and then, until we reached a door at the end of the hallway. She produced a ring of keys, selected one, and unlocked the door.

The storage room, a semi-attic, was filled with boxes, cartons, and miscellaneous other bits.

"That stack over by the window," she said. "But everything's very dusty."

She remained in the doorway. "I'm expecting a group momentarily."

I nodded. "By all means go down and prepare to receive them. I have no idea how long I will be up here."

When she was gone, I began opening the Griggsby cases, of which there appeared to be at least two dozen.

In the third box I found the collection of Griggsby journals, each year apparently making up a separate volume.

I dug down to the journal dated 1863.

Would Artemus Griggsby have anything to confide to his journal which he would not put in an official report?

I would soon find out.

I turned to the pages of May 17.

I learned nothing new from the first half of the entry—a quite long one. But then . . .

I went back upstairs (Artemus

Griggsby wrote) to Dr. Nicholson's room.

I did not know exactly what I was looking for, or whether there was anything to find, but I thought I really should make the effort to find out more about the murder victim.

Once again I paged through the two packed wardrobes, discovering nothing new to draw my interest. I noted once more the half-empty whiskey bottle and the dusty medical bag beside the shoes.

This time I opened the bag and rummaged through its contents.

What was that at the bottom? An envelope?

It was, and since it was not sealed, I had no qualms in removing its contents.

I found a marriage certificate—or more properly, as attested to in one corner, a copy of a marriage certificate — issued in Nashville, Tennessee, on January 7, 1835, testifying to the union of one Melanie Truitt and a Samuel Meechum.

Melanie Truitt? Samuel Meechum?

I went back downstairs and found the maid Kate.

"Ah," she said. "About to make an arrest?"

"Could you please tell Mrs. Darby that I would like to see her?"

"Why?"

"None of your damn business. I'll wait in the drawing room."

Mrs. Darby appeared there some ten minutes later. She paused in the

doorway and then came carefully toward me. "Can I help you, sheriff?"

Since I had seen her last she had acquired a faint aura of liquor.

"Mrs. Darby," I said, "what was your maiden name?"

She frowned slightly. "Truitt. Why?"

I handed her the marriage certificate copy.

She stared at the paper for a moment, then reached into the pocket of her dress and produced a pair of silver-rimmed reading glasses.

I was faintly shaken. Somehow one does not expect a woman such as Mrs. Darby to need reading glasses. They made her look ten years older.

She read the paper and then returned the glasses to her pocket. "Mr. Meechum was my first husband. I married him when I was sixteen. He died two years later. Where did you find this—this paper?"

"Concealed among Dr. Nicholson's things. Why would he keep a copy of your first marriage certificate?"

"I have no idea."

"Mrs. Darby," I said, "I notice that your first husband's given name was Samuel."

"Yes?"

"And Dr. Nicholson's first name was also Samuel."

"It is a coincidence, nothing more."

"How did your first husband die?"

"A fever."

"He died in Nashville?"

"Yes."

"That would be about 1837?"

"I suppose so."

"I'll have to write to the proper authorities there to verify that."

She frowned. Isn't my word enough? Why must you pursue this further?"

"I'm afraid it is my duty, Mrs. Darby. To explore all the facts."

"But what does my first husband's death have to do with Dr. Nicholson's murder?"

"Possibly nothing. However, I must investigate."

There was a silence as she studied me. "Does anyone besides you know about this marriage certificate?"

"No."

She went to the bell rope and pulled it.

After a moment the maid appeared.

"Kate," Mrs. Darby said "bring down the tray beside my bed. And an extra glass."

Mrs. Darby and I remained silent until Kate O'Reilly re-appeared with a silver tray which held a half-empty bottle of brandy, a glass pitcher of what appeared to be water, a sugar bowl, a spoon and two glasses. She put them on a table, glared at me, and left.

Mrs. Darby indicated that I do the honors. "Two fingers of brandy," she said "A little branch water, and a spoon of sugar"

I prepared the drink as directed and brought it to her.

She waited until I poured myself half an inch of brandy.

"Ordinarily I don't touch liquor more than once or twice a year," she said. "But I think Sam's death needs some sort of commemoration."

She sipped from her glass. "Yes, Sam Nicholson and I were married in Nashville in the year of our Lord 1835. Only his name was Meechum then. I had a stake of \$2500 in gold left to me by my father." She smiled faintly. "He was a saloon keeper, but the real business was in the rooms upstairs."

She sighed. "Sam and I had a good time on that \$2500. I'll admit to that. But the day after we spent the last dollar, Sam disappeared. Three weeks later, I heard that he'd been killed in a gambling argument on a river boat."

"But Meechum wasn't dead?"

"Obviously not. He showed up here about a year ago."

"How did he find you?"

"It wasn't a question of finding. I had nothing to hide. Sam was dead, as far as I knew, and that made me a *bona fide* widow. I met Julius a year later and married him. When Sam passed through Nashville last year, he discovered that I'd remarried and where I'd moved."

"Why did he come up here after all those years?"

"For money, of course."

"He blackmailed you?"

"Carefully. Sam was never one

to kill a golden goose or raise unnecessary discontent."

"And your husband paid?"

"Julius knew nothing about it. As far as he was concerned, my first husband was dead."

I wondered how it was possible for her to pay Nicholson, probably generously, without her husband being aware of it.

She finished her drink and handed me the glass. "More."

I went to the bottle. "Nicholson forced you to accept him as a house guest?"

She smiled faintly. "Sam could still be a lot of fun."

Probably a good conversationalist, I thought. I poured brandy. "Now that Meechum is really dead I suppose that you and your husband will go somewhere and discreetly have another marriage ceremony performed?" I cleared my throat. "To—ah, legitimize the status of your children."

She took the filled glass. "Hell, no. Let sleeping dogs lie. Nobody knows about this but you and me and let's keep it that way."

I drew myself up to the responsibility. "My lips are sealed, madam. And I certainly shall not resort to blackmail."

Her voice seemed to be thickening a bit. "Not today, at least. You're an odd-looking man for a sheriff."

I colored slightly. "I consider the position temporary. I much prefer being a librarian, as I was in Brook-

lyn, but my doctor advised me to go farther west for the sake of my health. Frankly, I haven't noticed any particular difference in the air here."

She drank half her brandy and branch water. "The village doesn't have a library?"

I nodded sadly. "Unfortunately not."

She gave that some thought. "Hell, I suppose the people around here could use a little culture. I'll pull a few strings and get the library rolling. We'll put you in charge of the books. How does that suit you?"

It suited me just fine, but I had the entirely irrational feeling that I had just blackmailed somebody. I went to the bottle, half filled my glass, and changed the subject. "Your son seems to have been rather fond of Dr. Nicholson."

"Why shouldn't he be? Sam probably saved his life."

"On the battlefield?"

She laughed lightly. "Wars aren't made for everybody. Certainly not for people like Oswald. Sensitive and delicate, you know."

I nodded. "As you are, madam."

She looked at me sharply for a second and then continued. "But the war came, the bands played, and Oswald got himself some uniforms." She sipped her drink. "I arranged things and the men of the regiment elected him captain. Might have been a major, except that the second keg of whiskey got lost on the way to the camp ground."

"Dr. Nicholson became a member of the regiment at the same time?"

"Sam was always a little restless. The regiment needed a surgeon, so he joined too."

There had been a point of doubt in my mind. "Then Nicholson really was a doctor?"

She shrugged. "Sam read some books five years ago and set himself up in business. What does a doctor need to know? How to deliver a baby, wait out a fever, and saw off a leg. That's it. Maybe a hundred years from now it will be different, but that's the way it is now."

She went to the bottle herself this time and poured, forgetting the branch water and the sugar.

"How did Nicholson save your son's life?"

She dabbed at the perspiration on her forehead with a tiny handkerchief. "Sam and Oswald were riding ahead of the regiment when the Confederate batteries opened up in the distance, and then not even in their direction. But poor Oswald had never heard anything like that before. He fainted and fell off his horse. Luckily they were in a grove of trees out of sight of the regiment when it happened. Sam pulled Oswald into an abandoned shed and let the troops pass."

"Oswald wasn't wounded at all?"

"Not unless you want to count falling off a horse. But Sam bandaged him up and down anyway and personally escorted him to a field

hospital. He arranged that nobody but he himself would touch Oswald's bandages."

She found herself a chair and sat down. "Cost me three thousand dollars to get Oswald out of the army all proper and legal. Sam took care of the details. He was always good at that. Probably pocketed half the money I sent him, but he got the job done. Oswald was discharged because of wounds received in action. Sam even got him a medal for bravery."

I realized that I should be outraged, but somehow it seemed too difficult. "Why was it necessary to go through all that trouble and expense to get your son out of the army? I believe that an officer is still entitled to resign his commission whenever he so chooses?"

She nodded slowly. "But there would always be a certain stigma attached to resigning while a war was still being fought. I have certain plans for Oswald's future and we can't afford any stigma on his war record."

"How did Nicholson get out of the army?"

"He resigned. Sam didn't give a damn about stigma."

I went back to the tray for a refill and for some reason staggered slightly. I turned into a window alcove to see if I could get a little fresh air.

I heard someone enter the room and then the voice of Julius Darby. "Melanie, Tipton's asking thirty-five

thousand for his acreage now. I think we ought to buy."

"No," Melanie said firmly.

I turned, but there was a heavy drape before my face. I realized that Julius couldn't see me and neither could I see him. I decided to keep it that way.

Julius' voice had a touch of the pleading. "But Melanie, I think it's a fair price."

"Maybe it is," Melanie said, "but I know that nobody besides us even made him an offer. He'll have to go down another five thousand before I think about it."

Julius moved to another subject. "I met a man at McGinty's blacksmith shop and he's the inventor of a cherry pitter. For only five hundred dollars I can get fifty per cent of everything he—"

"Forget it."

"But it works, Melanie. I saw it with my own eyes. We could make a fortune."

"No."

Julius sighed. "Well, I guess I'll go to the stable and check on that new black mare."

"Fine," Melanie said. "But don't get in the way of the grooms. They have been complaining about that lately."

When he was gone, I came out from behind the window drape.

Melanie Darby frowned, as though trying to remember who I was and then she did. "Why aren't you in the army?"

I drew myself up. "Madam, I vol-

unteered several times, but the doctors rejected me."

I then said my good-bys and carefully made my way to the door.

I looked back.

There sat Melanie Darby on a highbacked chair.

A veritable cameo, I admitted. Delicate, aristocratic features. Tiny figure. Tiny hands.

And drunk.

I read entries for several days following the seventeenth, but evidently Griggsby had no more to say on the Nicholson murder.

I closed the journal and my eyes went back to the last box I'd opened. I picked up a thick marbled volume. It was *The Mill on the Floss*. A black bookmark reposed historically between pages 72 and 73.

My attention wandered to a packet of envelopes neatly tied up with a faded blue ribbon. I picked it up. The face of the top envelope bore the words, *Artemus Griggsby, Esq.* Esquire?

The ribbon was a bit loose and I was able to riffle through the pack. Each of the envelopes appeared to have Artemus Griggsby's name on its face.

I turned the bundle over.

What was that red blob on the reverse side of the envelope? A fragment of wax?

Of course. Sealing wax.

I pulled off the ribbon. There were about thirty envelopes in the pack. Since they bore no specific

address or cancellation marks, they had evidently been delivered by hand.

Each of the envelopes appeared to have at one time been sealed. In some cases the sealing wax had disappeared entirely, leaving just the shadow of its existence. In others a few fragments still clung to the paper. However, on one of the envelopes all of the wax had survived, through cracked, of course, in the process of opening.

I fitted the pieces of the seal carefully together.

What was that on top of the seal?

A thumb print?

Yes.

In those days some people were content with just the wax seal itself. Others stamped the wax with various devices or initials, and still others affixed a thumb or fingerprint to the seal indicating a close personal interest in the intended receiver of the letter.

I am certainly not one to claim recognition of a thumb print at a glance, yet I felt a rising excitement.

I removed the Bowie knife from its box and lay it beside the seal. Using my magnifying glass, I carefully compared both prints.

They were identical.

This was it.

The killer of Dr. Nicholson had addressed these envelopes to Artemus Griggsby.

I heard a noise behind me and

It was Miss Griggsby standing in the hall, somehow reluctant to enter. She appeared to glance to the right and to the left, and then slowly she stepped a foot or two into the room.

I showed her the envelope. "Do you realize what this is?"

She looked and nodded. "Oh, those. They were written by my great-grandmother before she married Artemus Griggsby."

I blinked.

She married Artemus Griggsby?

But, of course.

That explained it.

That was why Griggsby stopped short of finding the murderer. Deliberately?

There was no art of fingerprinting in those days, but surely Griggsby must have been observant enough to note the size and number of the fingerprints on the knife. And surely he must have been able to eliminate Julius Darby because of his missing finger, and Captain Oswald Darby because he was left-handed, and Mrs. Darby because her hands were too small.

And that left only Emma.

But he had been strongly attracted by her and the last thing in the world he wanted to do was . . .

Why had Emma Darby killed Dr. Nicholson?

One could only guess.

Nicholson had quite an eye for the ladies, as Dr. Griffith had put it. And he had no scruples.

He had made advances to Emma.

And she had responded. Who could blame her? A plain woman of twenty-four receiving male attention, probably for the first time in her life.

Ad when he had told her that he couldn't—or wouldn't—marry her, the distraught woman had seized the Bowie knife and stabbed him to death.

I studied Miss Griggsby. What would be her reaction if it were made public that her great-grandmother was a murderess?

It might be devastating. Certainly she wouldn't thank me.

And the Darby descendants? Would they be happy to know that the twelfth governor of our state was illegitimate and a fraud?

What would they do to Miss Griggsby for letting me see the Griggsby journals?

Probably they'd fire her.

I shook my head. No, it was better not to stir the ashes. Leave things as they were.

I sighed and pulled the letter out of its envelope. There was no salutation whatsoever and the sentences were uncommonly short.

*I have the red pencil box.
I will show the red pencil box
to my brother. My brother
does not have a red pencil box.*

What the devil?

"Those are the lessons," Miss Griggsby said. "He taught her how to read and write before they were married."

I blinked. "You mean Emma Darby was illiterate?"

"Emma Darby. Why, no. She had a quite good formal education. I'm speaking of Kate O'Reilly. She was a maid in the Darby household. Aramus Griggsby married her. She was really quite intelligent. Later in life she wrote a three-volume Gothic romance."

I was stunned.

Kate O'Reilly a murderess? The Irish maid whose Uncle Timothy had run for sheriff and been struck down by prejudice?

But what could her motive possibly have been?

Well, now that I thought it over, probably the same as the one I'd attributed to Emma Darby. People like Sam Nicholson were always fooling around with the servants.

Kate had been spurned—at least insofar as the altar was concerned—and she had seized the Bowie knife and dispatched Sam Nicholson.

I looked at the seal on the envelope again and reached for the knife to compare . . .

Miss Griggsby shrieked and immediately two uniformed police officers leaped into the room, revolvers in their hands.

Where had they come from? Had

they been standing just outside? Had she telephoned for them? But why?

Miss Griggsby remained highly agitated. "He came in here just off the street and he crawled on the drawing room floor and now he tried to stab me!"

I recognized the two policemen and they recognized me.

Officer Trapp put away his revolver. "It's all right, ma'am. He's harmless."

Harmless?

I took a deep breath. "Miss Griggsby, I assure you that I did not have the slightest intention of stabbing you. I merely intended to return the knife to its proper case."

And I did just that.

"What were you doing here?" Trapp asked.

"Official police business," I said. "I am not at liberty to disclose it to every patrolman I happen to meet."

I walked stiffly past them and left the building. As I glanced back, I thought I saw them at one of the third story windows.

My ears rang slightly.

I found a parking ticket under the windshield wiper of my car.

When I got home I drank three stiff glasses of sherry.

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THE DROP

by GEORGE C. CHESBRO

It was a kook assignment they had given me. All I had to do was save a guy who wanted to die, break up an international dope ring — and get back alive. It was a tough job for a giant — and I was a hungry dwarf!



HE WAS A big man, filled with a guy-wire tension and animal wariness that even his three-hundred dollar tailored suit couldn't hide.

He came in the door, stopped and blinked, then walked over to my desk. I rose and took the proffered hand, waiting for the nervous, embarrassed reaction which usually preceded mumbled apologies and a hurried exit. It didn't come.

"Dr. Frederickson?"

Now, there are any number of disadvantages to being a dwarf, all compounded when you've chosen

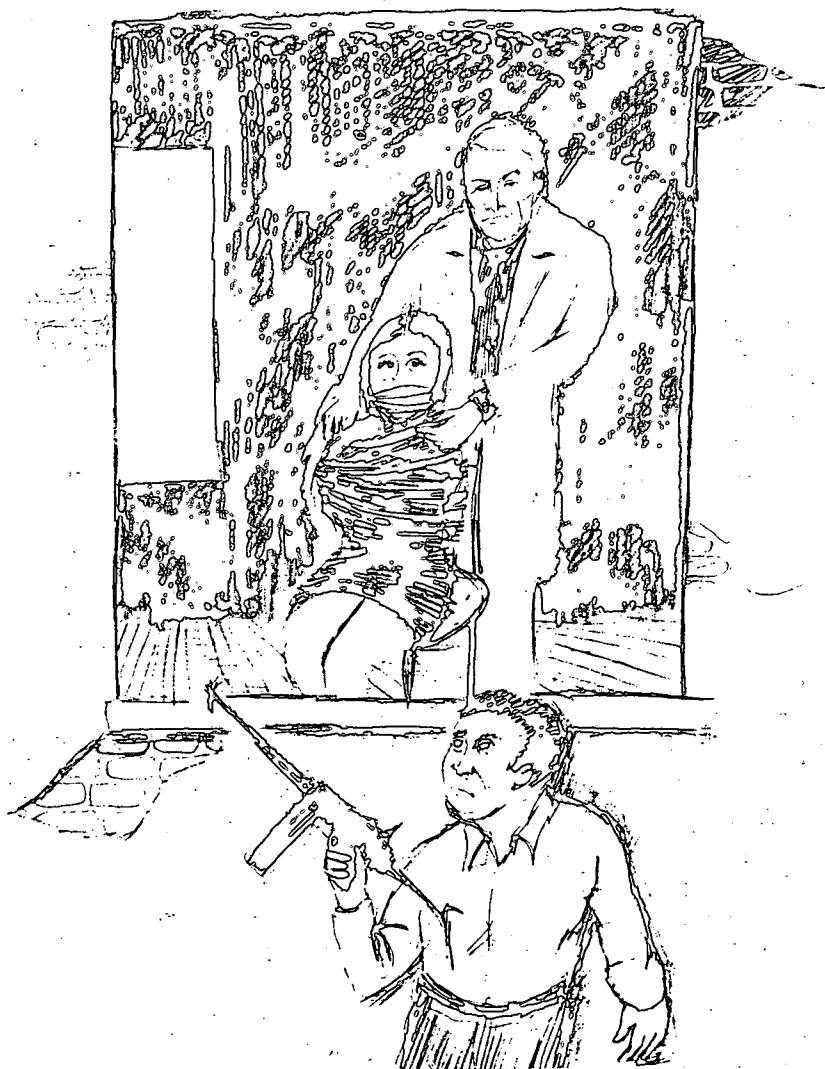
the somewhat unlikely career of a private investigator. I stand four feet eight inches in my socks. I've been told I don't exactly inspire confidence in prospective clients.

"I'm Frederickson," I said. "Mister will do."

"But you are the private detective who also teaches at the university?"

You'd be surprised at the number of people who get their jollies from playing practical jokes on dwarfs. For my own protection, I liked to try to size up people fast. He had manners, but I suspected

A TALE OF NAMELESS TERROR



they'd come out of a book and were things that he put on and took off like cuff links; it all depended upon the occasion. His eyes were muddy and the muscles in his face were tense, which meant that he was probably going to hold something back, at least in the beginning.

I put his age at around thirty-five, five years older than myself. I'd already decided I didn't like him. Still, there was an air of absorption about the man that suggested to me he hadn't come to play games. I wanted the job, so I decided to give him some information.

"My doctorate is in criminology, and that's what I teach at the university," I said evenly, determined to lay everything out in the open. "It's true that I operate a private practice but, to be perfectly frank with you, I haven't had that much experience, at least not in the field. I don't have a large clientele. Much of my business is specialized lab work which I do on a contract basis for the New York police and an occasional Federal agency.

"I'm not running down my abilities, which I happen to think are formidable. I'm just advising you as to the product you're buying."

I might have added that hidden beneath the brusque patina of those few brief words was the story of years of bitterness and frustration, but, of course, I didn't. I'd decided long ago that when the time came that I couldn't keep my bitterness to myself I'd move permanently to the

protective cocoon of the university. That time hadn't come yet.

I waited to see if I'd scared my prospective client away.

"My name is James Barrett," the man said. "I don't need a list of your qualifications because I've already check them out. Actually, I'd say you're quite modest. As a forensic lab man, you're considered tops in your field. As a teacher, your students are patiently waiting for you to walk on water. It was your work on the Carter case that finally —"

"How can I help you, Mr. Barrett?" I said, a bit curtly. Barrett was being oily, and I didn't like that. Also, he'd touched on the subject of my successes, and that was a sore point with me. It's not hard to be a great civil servant if you've got a measured I.Q. of 156, as I have.

It is hard to achieve in private life if you're a dwarf, as I am. And that was what I craved, private achievement in my chosen profession.

Barrett sensed my displeasure and made an apologetic gesture. I swallowed hard. I was the one who'd been pushing, and it was time to make amends.

"I'm sorry, Barrett," I said. "I'm out of line. You see I run up against too many people who go out of their way to spare my feelings. You don't see many dwarfs outside the circus, and deformity tends to make people uncomfortable. I like to clear

the air first. I can see now that it wasn't necessary with you."

The fact of the matter was that I had once been one of the dwarfs people see in the circus; eight years while I was studying for my degree.

"Mongo The Great," which looked better on a marquee than "Freddy Frederickson." Mongo The Magnificent, The Dwarf Who Could Out-Tumble The Tumblers. A freak to most people. The memory made my stomach churn.

"Dr. Frederickson, I would like you to go to Europe and look for my brother."

I waited, watching the other man. Barrett wiped his brow with a silk handkerchief. To me, he didn't look like the type to worry about anyone, not even his brother. But, if it was an act it was a convincing one.

"Tommy's a few years younger than myself," Barrett continued. "The other end of a large family. A few months ago he took up with a woman who was, shall I say, a bad influence on him."

"Just a minute, Mr. Barrett. How old is your brother?"

"Twenty-five."

I shrugged, as if that was the only explanation needed.

"I know he's of age, and can't be forced into doing anything. But this problem has nothing to do with age."

"What is the problem, Mr. Barrett?"

"Drugs."

I nodded, suddenly very sober to his habit."



We'd established instant communications, Barrett and I. That one obscenity, drugs, spoke volumes to me, as it does to anyone who has spent time in a ghetto or on a college campus.

"I'm still not sure I can help, Mr. Barrett," I said quietly. "Addiction's a personal hell, and a man has to find his own road out."

"I realize that. But I'm hoping you'll be able to give him a little more time to find that road. Tommy's an artist, and quite good, I'm told by those who should know. But, like many artists, he lives in a never-never land. Right now he's on the brink of very serious trouble and he must be made to see that. If he does, I'm betting that it will wake him up."

"I take it the serious trouble you're talking about is in addiction

"Yes. You see, Tommy and Elizabeth —"

"Elizabeth?"

"Elizabeth Hotaling, the girl he took up with. In order to support their habit they started trafficking, smuggling drugs in and out of Italy, selling them to tourists and students. Nothing big — they're not Syndicate — but big enough to attract the attention of Interpol. My sources, which are impeccable, assure me that he'll be arrested the next time he crosses the border, and that he'll receive a very stiff sentence."

I wondered who his sources were, and if Barrett knew that my own brother, Garth, was a New York detective, and a Narco at that. I didn't ask.

"Mr. Barrett, your brother didn't have to go all the way to Italy to feed and support a habit. New York's the drug Mecca of the world."

"Tommy found out that I was considering turning him into the health authorities here for forced treatment."

"Well, that's not going to work over there. Europe isn't the United States. The Europeans take a dim view of drug users and pushers, especially when they're Americans."

"That's why I want you to find him," Barrett said, producing a thick file folder and placing it on my desk. "I know you can't force him to come back, but at least you can warn him that they're on to him. That's all I want you to do — tell him what

I've told you. I'll pay you five thousand dollars, plus expenses."

"You want to pay me five thousand dollars for finding a man and delivering a message?"

Barrett shrugged. "I have the money, and I feel a responsibility toward my brother. If you decide to take the job, I think this dossier may help. It has samples of his paintings, as well as descriptions of his habits, life style, and so on."

Something smelled bad, but I'm as corruptible as the next man. Probably more so. Still I seemed determined to scare Barrett off. "You're very thorough, Mr. Barrett. But, why me?"

"Because you have a reputation for being able to establish a rapport with young people. If I sent some tough guy over there, Tommy wouldn't listen. I'm betting that if he'll listen to anyone, it'll be you."

I flushed at the mention of tough guy; Barrett might have been talking about Garth, all six feet, two inches of him.

"I'll take the job, Mr. Barrett," I said. "But you'll be charged the normal rates. I get one hundred dollars a day, plus expenses. If I can't find your brother in fifty days, he's not to be found."

"Thank you, Dr. Frederickson," Barrett said. There was just a hint of laughter in the man's voice and I couldn't tell whether it came from a sense of relief, or something else. "There's a round-trip airline ticket inside that folder, along with a check

for one thousand dollars. I trust that's a sufficient retainer."

"It is," I said, trying as best I could to keep my own feelings of elation out of my voice. It had been some time since I'd seen that much money all in one place.

"Dr. Frederickson—" Barrett studied the backs of his own hands. "Since time is so very important in this matter, I had hoped that you—well, I'd hoped that you could get on it right away."

"I'll be on the first plane," I said, reaching for the telephone. I allowed myself a smile. "One advantage of being my size is that it doesn't take you long to pack."

I LANDED IN Rome, checked in at a hotel near the Vatican, and immediately began making the rounds of the art galleries. An artist, especially a young one, would probably be in either Florence or Venice; a drug user and pusher in Rome. Besides, if Tommy Barrett was as good as his brother said he was, and if he was making it, the chances were that some of his work would be surfacing in the Rome galleries.

I was checking the stuff in the galleries against the art samples in the dossier Barrett had given me. I was looking for work with Tommy Barrett's style or signature preferably both. If I got no lead on him in Rome, then I could try Florence, Venice, or maybe Verona. Then there were the jails to be checked out; after that the cemeteries.

I made no effort to shake the man who was following me, mainly because I was curious as to his reasons. He looked young, big and strong; a professional on his way up. He was good, but not that good. I decided to lead him around a bit. Following the example of my feet, my mind began to wander.

I was still wondering who Barrett's sources were, and how he had found out about me. I certainly didn't have that many references, not the kind Barrett would know. My light had been hidden under a test tube for most of my short career.

I'd always been interested in criminology, and nature had partially compensated for her small joke by endowing me with a rather impressive I.Q. which put me in the so-called genius category. All of which doesn't make it any easier to reach the groceries on the top shelf of Life's supermarket.

Of course, there isn't a police force in the world that would hire me on a regular basis and, even if there was, I wouldn't want it. Garth was a public servant because he *wanted* to be, me, because I *had* to be. And there was the difference.

It had often occurred to me that I was merely trying to over-compensate for the fact that my brother had been born normal and I had not. But I knew it was more than that. Part of it boiled down to the fact that I had the same needs and shared the same hungers as all men,

a yearning for self respect, for simple human dignity.

All of which tends, at times, to make me a little paranoid. But it wasn't paranoia that had put the man on my tail, and paranoia didn't explain why Barrett had been willing to pay five thousand dollars for the somewhat ephemereal quality of rapport.

On the other hand, I didn't anticipate that much difficulty in tracking down Tommy Barrett. Dead, alive, or imprisoned I was fairly confident I'd be able to catch up with him. His dossier revealed him to be an artistic, highly sensitive individual, intelligent but lacking the guile necessary to elude the police or me for very long.

Also, Tommy Barrett's life style and mode of dress limited him in the places he could safely go without immediately attracting attention. Add to that the fact that I speak fluent Italian, as well as seven other major languages and three African dialects I had picked up for fun. I figured my chances of finding an expatriate American in Italy were pretty good.

I scored on my fifth stop — Tommy Barrett's work, style and signature was propped up in the window. The young girl in the store was cooperative; the artist lived in Venice. Fifteen minutes later I was on my way to the train station.

I decided it was time to get rid of my tail and, at the same time, try to get some line on who he was

and why he was still following me.

A few years before, I'd almost been killed by a pervert who had a thing for dwarfs. After that, I'd taken steps to make sure it never happened again. I knew every nerve and pressure point in the human body.

The years in the circus had toughened my own muscles, and I had kept them that way. Knowledge of anatomy was my ultimate weapon, and Karate had provided me with a delivery system.

I went down a quiet side street, ducked into an alley and immediately flattened myself against the side of the building.

My friend arrived a few moments later. It's doubtful he knew what hit him. I shifted my weight forward, thrusting the stiffened fingers of my right hand deep into the man's solar plexus, just beneath the rib cage. He bounced once on his face, then lay still.

I worked quickly, dumping the contents of his pockets out onto the ground. I found a small, blurred tattoo on the inside, fleshy part of his thumb that I recognized as a Sicilian clan marking. Minor mafia. His clothes were dusty, as though he had recently walked through a field of grain. There was a small spiral notebook. I slipped it into my pocket and walked hurriedly from the alley.

I GOT OFF the train in Mestra, a small town a few kilometers from

Venice where I had found comfortable lodgings on previous trips to Italy, and which was relatively free from the summer tourist crush.

It was too late to go into Venice that day so I checked into a hotel, rested awhile, then went out for some *pasta*. Later, I settled down in my room with a brandy to go over the small notebook I had taken from the man I'd decked in the alley.

It didn't take me long to decide there wasn't much in the book that would be of use to me. Most of the pages were filled with crude obscene drawings. There were the names of women, each name accompanied by a sort of sexual rating which I suspected was more wishful than the result of actual research. On the last page was the neatly lettered notation, 823drop10. I put the notebook on my bed stand and went to sleep.

I got up the next morning and took a cab to the outskirts of Venice, then got on a water bus. If Tommy Barrett was in Venice, I had a pretty good idea I'd find him, this time of day, in the middle of the tourist season.

I got off at St. Mark's Square, then pushed my way through the crowds to the central *piazza* itself. I took the elevator to the top of the clock tower and got off on the observation deck. I glanced once more at the dossier photos, then took the binoculars I'd brought with me out of their case.

I didn't need them; even without

the glasses I could see Tommy Barrett standing in front of St. Mark's Basilica, directly beneath its famed four horses. Elizabeth Hoteling was with him, shilling his sketches to the shifting knots of people that would gather around him for a few minutes watching him work, then drift on to one of the many other artists at work in the *piazza*.

Easy cases make me nervous. I descended and attached myself to a group of Barrett's current admirers. Gradually, I worked my way to the front, where I had a clear view of the artist and his girl friend. Elizabeth Hoteling caught my eye and smiled. I smiled back.

The girl in front of me matched the photograph in the dossier, but that was all. The rest of Barrett's description just didn't fit. True, there was a toughness about her, in the way she moved and handled herself. But I was positive that once she'd been tougher, and that most of that quality had been burned out of her; what remained now was only an aura, a lingering memory, like the smell of ozone in the air after a thunderstorm.

She was beautiful, but she had more than that; a confidence, a sense of *presence* that could only have come from a variety of experiences she certainly hadn't gotten in the middle of St. Mark's Square.

Tommy Barrett, from what I could tell by simply looking at him, wasn't in the same league. Not as

far as experience was concerned. They contrasted, yet somehow they matched perfectly. I guessed they were happy together.

Of one thing I was certain: neither one of them used drugs, at least not on a regular basis, and even then not the hard stuff. I can spot most serious heads a block away, if not by needle tracks then by the pupils of the eyes, the pallor of the skin, nervous mannerisms, or any one of a hundred other traits that are apparent to the trained observer.

Whatever the couple's problems, drugs wasn't one of them. And, if Tommy Barrett was a notorious pusher, what was he doing in the middle of St. Mark's Square peddling charcoal sketches to tourists?

And what was I doing in Italy?

There was no doubt but that the elder Barrett had lied. But, why? It seemed I had inherited a puzzle along with my retainer, and the shape of that puzzle was constantly changing. I decided to try some new pieces.

I stepped forward and touched Elizabeth Hotaling gently on the arm, then leaned toward Tommy Barrett.

"Excuse me," I said quietly. "I'm Mongo Frederickson. I wonder if I could talk to you privately? I won't take much of your time."

"I don't bargain on the price of the sketches, mister," Barrett said without looking up. His tone was not hostile, simply businesslike.

"The sketches are two dollars apiece, Mr. Frederickson," the girl said. "That really isn't very much, and it's the best work you'll find around here. If you're interested in oils, we'd love to have you visit our apartment. I make excellent *Capucino*."

"I'm sure you do, Miss Hotaling, and I'd like to see Mr. Barrett's work, but first I'd like to talk to you."

I waited for the reaction which came; the man and woman exchanged quick glances. I followed up my lead. "You're Elizabeth Hotaling and you're Tommy Barrett," I said, indicating the two of them. "I'm here to deliver a message from Tommy's brother."

Barrett suddenly paused in the middle of a stroke, then carefully placed the piece of charcoal he'd been working with into the chalk tray of his easel. He slowly turned on his stool, away from the crowd. I walked around to the front of him, the girl trailing a few steps behind.

"Who are you?" Barrett said softly, his eyes searching my face.

"I gave you my name. I'm a private detective from New York. As I said, your brother sent me here to deliver a message."

"Mister, I don't have a brother."

I can't say I was surprised. That was the way the case had been going. Now the trick was to discover who the man in my office had been, and what game he was playing. I

decided to go slow with Barrett and the girl; reactions were proving more reliable than words.

"I'm sure you must know this man," I said carefully, watching Barrett. "He's big, over six feet. Snappy dresser. He talks good but you can tell —"

That was too slow. The description had been meager but it had had an immediate effect on the young painter and his girl friend. Elizabeth Hotaling let out a strangled sob and struck at my back with her fists. The blows didn't hurt but they did distract me long enough to enable Tommy Barrett to bounce one of his wooden easel frames off the side of my head, knocking me to my knees. Barrett grabbed the girl's hand, dragging her after him into the crowd.

The blow had dazed me. Still, I would have been up and after them if it had not been for the man kneeling over me, his knee digging into the muscles of my arm.

Even in this rather untenable situation, pain shrieking through every nerve end in my body, I couldn't help but admire his technique; it was beautiful. To the crowd it must have seemed as though he was trying to help me; only I could see the ugly black sapper he pulled from beneath his sport coat, or the short, hard stroke that slammed into the base of my skull.

THE SMELL OF rotting fish finally woke me up. I was dangling over



the edge of a walkway between two buildings, my face about four inches above the surface of a particularly foul-smelling, stagnant stretch of backwater from one of the canals.

I had no idea how the man had gotten me here. Probably, he'd simply picked me up and carried me off. After all, in this day and age, who asks questions just because you're carrying around a dwarf?

One thing was certain; the man knew his trade, and if he'd wanted me dead I'd be at the bottom of the canal instead of just smelling it.

There had been no need to find Tommy Barrett because Tommy Barrett hadn't been hiding. Anyone could have done what I had done so far, but I had been chosen to do

it, which meant that I was, if not the star of the opera, at least first tenor. Why?

I was sure I'd never seen the man in my office in my life and I hadn't been busy enough to make *that* kind of enemy. I tried to make some connection with my work at the university but couldn't. I doubted any parent would go to these lengths because I'd failed a student.

I was hurting. I managed to drag myself out through the labyrinth of alleys to the main square, then got on a water bus. It was late. There wasn't a cab in sight back at the main terminal, and the buses had stopped running. Despite the fact that I looked like something Boris Karloff had rejected, I managed to hitch a ride back to Mestra.

It was time to call Garth. As much as I hated to admit it, Big Brother's help was needed. Actually, what I needed was information, and that information, if it existed, would most likely be found on a police blotter. But it could wait. Figuring the time differential, Garth would be just getting out of bed, and there wasn't much he could do for me there. Besides, I needed sleep myself if I hoped to make any sense over the phone.

I stumbled into my room and immediately knew something was wrong; the empty space on the night stand where I had placed the notebook caught and held my attention like a gun bore aimed at my belly.

Grimacing against the pain in my

head, I made a quick check of the room. It didn't take me long to discover that the lock on my suitcase had been sprung. Nothing was missing. My clothes were a bit rumpled, but it almost seemed as if the searcher had made a conscious effort to leave everything as he had found it despite the fact that I would certainly know he had been there because of the missing notebook. *That* produced a discordant note inside my head, but things up there were already so out of tune that I didn't give it much thought; I hurt too much.

I went into the bathroom and filled the sink with cold water, then plunged my head in and gingerly scrubbed at the caked blood where the blackjack had bounced off. I blew bubbles beneath the water to take my mind off the pain. I owed somebody, I thought; I certainly did owe somebody.

The two policemen were waiting for me when I came out.

They looked like Abbot and Costello. Both men had their guns drawn and pointed at me. Costello was down on one knee, his arm extended straight out in front of him as though he was preparing to defend against the Charge of the Light Brigade. I almost laughed; instead, I muttered a long string of carefully selected obscenities.

Neither man said anything. Abbott jiggled his gun and Costello rose and went to my suitcase. The fat man groped around inside the

lining for a few moments, then smiled. Mad genius that I am, it suddenly occurred to me whoever had taken the notebook wasn't entirely dishonest.

Like a pack rat, the man had felt compelled to leave something behind to soothe my ruffled feelings. Like the plastic bag filled with heroin that Costello was now holding in his hand.

"You're making a mistake," I said. The words blurred on my tongue. "Do you think I'd be stupid enough to leave a bag of heroin laying around in an empty suitcase? Look at the lock; it's been jimmied."

"The condition of your luggage is no concern of ours, *signor*," Abbott said evenly. His tone belied his comical appearance. He was a serious man, and he hated me. It was obvious that somewhere along the line he'd picked up more than a passing interest in people he suspected of pushing drugs.

"My name is Frederickson; Dr. Mon . . . Frederick Frederickson. I'm a private detective. I didn't put those drugs there. I've never seen that plastic bag before in my life."

"We'll have plenty of time to work these details out, *signor*. In the meantime, you should know that the boy you sold drugs to this afternoon is dead."

"What boy?" I whispered.

"The artist. We found his body in an alley. He had died from an overdose of the heroin you sold him. Fortunately, we have many inform-

ants. It was not difficult to find a man of your —"

He hesitated, embarrassed. I rushed to fill in the silence. "What about the girl that was with him?"

"Venice has many alleys, *signor*."

Little tumblers were clicking in my brain, tapping out a combination that spelled a prison cell. Or death. I was glad I hadn't eaten. As it was, I was fighting off a bad case of the dry heaves. I was sure that whoever was framing me wouldn't stop here, and I wasn't anxious to wait around to see what other surprises were in store for me.

"*Signor*, you are under arrest for illegal possession of heroin and for the murder of Thomas Barrett."

Costello came for me and I reacted instinctively, trying to imagine myself back in the center ring where the punishment for bad timing might be a broken bone or the mocking laughter of the crowd, but never a bullet in the brain.

I drove the point of my shoe into Costello's chin, then leaped forward, tucking myself into a ball, rolling, then exploding into the side of Abbott's knees. Abbott crumpled over me shielding me for a moment with his body from the death in his partner's hand.

I didn't stop. I used the momentum from my first rush to carry me over into another roll, then planted my feet under me and leaped head first for the window, closing my eyes and balling my fists

to minimize any injuries from the flying glass. I opened my eyes just in time, reaching out and grabbing the edge of the steel railing on the fire escape outside the window. That saved me from a five-story fall.

I broke my reverse swing by shortening the extension of my arms and using my right hip to absorb the shock of my body falling back against the railing. Glass was showering all around and I could smell the odor of my own blood.

There was the ugly sound of a gunshot, then the whine of steel striking steel. It was still Circus all the way. There was no time to climb down, so I dropped; story by story, breaking my fall at each level by grabbing at the railings.

My left shoulder went on the last level, yanked out of its socket. I hit the sidewalk in free fall, immediately flexing my knees and rolling. After what seemed an hour or two of rolling around like a marble I came to a stop in an upright position against a garbage can that must have been filled with concrete.

Abbott was leaning out the window of my room, peering down into the darkness. My left arm with its dislocated shoulder was useless, and my legs hurt like hell, but I could tell they weren't broken. I allowed myself a small smile of satisfaction.

I wasn't dead, which meant I must have made it. I got up, ducked into an alley, somehow managed to climb a fence and kept going, keeping to the alleys.

A half mile away I sat down to rest and think.

Mongo The Magnificent? Freddy, the Village Idiot. I'd been had. And now I was a fugitive. I tried to rationalize why I had run, reminding myself that my frame was being nailed together by a master. That was true enough, but the real reason was pride.

Pride? A foolish thing, perhaps, to risk one's life for. Still, for me pride *was* my life or the only thing that made life worth living. Pride was the stuff oiling the gears that kept me going in a giants' world.

Pride made me care. The matter might have been cleared up while I was in custody, but it would have been done by somebody else. I would leave my prison cell a miserable, stupid dwarf who had been used as a pawn, a little man who had been made a messenger of death. I wanted to know who had involved me in Tommy Barrett's death. And why. I wanted to find out for myself.

The fact that I had run would be taken as conclusive evidence of guilt, and I could probably expect to be shot the next time around. Given my rather quaint physical characteristics, I figured I didn't have too many hours of freedom left.

I needed a phone. I knew where there was an American Express office open twenty-four hours a day and I hurried there. I knew it was risky to put myself inside four walls but I couldn't see where I had any

choice, not if I wanted to *do* something with the time I had.

I tried not to think of the surrounding glass or the fact that the office only seemed to have one door as I entered and walked up to the clerk on duty.

I gave him the number I wanted to call. The lines were free and it took him only a few moments to make the connection with New York. He motioned me to one of the booths lining the opposite wall. I went into the booth, closed the door, and squatted down on the floor, bracing my back against the wall.

"Garth?"

"Mongo! What the hell are you doing waking me up in the middle of the night?! And what's the matter with your voice?"

"Listen, big man, you're lucky I can talk at all," I said. I tried to sound nasty so we could continue playing our family game, but I couldn't. His voice sounded too good. "Garth, I'm in trouble. I need your help."

"Go ahead," Garth said. I could tell he was wide awake now. His voice was deadly serious.

"I need information on a man who may or may not be named James Barrett. It's probably an alias, but I want you to check it out for me anyway. Find out if there is a James Barrett with a record, and get back to me as soon as you can. I'll give you a number where —"

"I just left one James Barrett about four hours ago," Garth said.

He sounded puzzled. "Jimmy Barrett is my partner."

"Describe him."

"About five foot eight, eyes; blue. Hair; none. He's pushing retirement. Part of his left ear lobe is missing—"

I suddenly felt very sick and my arm was beginning to throb.

"And he has a son," I finished. My voice was barely a whisper.

"Yeah," Garth said. "Tommy. Nice boy. Barrett says the kid's an artist, apparently pretty good. The last I heard he was spending the summer in Italy. What does that have to do with you?"

"He's dead," I said too loudly. "What it has to do with me is that I helped kill him."

There was complete silence on the other end of the line. Slowly, my voice stretched thin by pain and fatigue, I filled Garth in on where I was and what had happened. My own words seemed alien to me, a shrieking whine emanating from some broken tape recorder inside my soul. The words hurt, and I used that pain to lash myself for my own gullibility and incompetence, for not smelling the set-up earlier and maybe preventing the death — or deaths — that had occurred. Finally it was over and Garth's voice came at me, soft but laced with rage, punctuated with heavy breathing.

"All right, Mongo, I know who the man is from your description. His name is Pernod, Vincent Per-

nod, and he's one of the biggest drug men around, a contractor for the mafia. You've just had a taste of Pernod's sense of humor and style of revenge."

"Why Barrett, and why me? And what's the connection with the girl?"

"Jimmy and I have spent the last eighteen months trying to run Pernod down, which means building a case. The pressure was building on him to the point where New York, his most lucrative market, was being taken away, and it was only a matter of time before we nailed him.

"Pernod doesn't take kindly to that kind of treatment and obviously he decided to do something about it. Killing Tommy Barrett was his way of getting at my partner; destroying you in the process was his way of getting at me. Add to that the fact that Elizabeth Hotaling is, or was, Pernod's ex-mistress and you begin to get a picture of how dirty the water is that you've been swimming in."

My knuckles were white where I had gripped the receiver. Pernod had had me pegged perfectly. He'd been sure I wouldn't contact Garth until it was too late, and he'd been right.

"Tommy met the girl down at the precinct station. He'd come to see his father about something and Elizabeth Hotaling was waiting while we grilled her boy friend. You saw the results."

My brain was beginning to

play tricks on me. I was having acid-flashes of memory; Pernod in my office, the man and woman in the pallazza, the sapper bouncing off my skull. My rage was growing, exploding hot splinters of hatred ricocheting off the sides of my mind.

"He has Italian help," I said, thinking of the two men I'd run into.

"Sure. He has a farm outside Rome, somewhere near *Cinecitta*," Garth said absently. "There's a small airstrip there, and we think that's how he gets his drops."

"Drops?"

"Drops — drug shipments. They bring the raw stuff in by plane from Lebanon and Turkey, then —"

"I've got it," I said. That explained the grain on the suit of the man who'd been following me.

"Now listen, Mongo," Garth continued evenly. "You haven't killed anyone, except maybe yourself if you keep running around loose. I have contacts there, and I know the department will put me on the first plane out of here. When the Italian authorities find out you've been messing with Pernod they'll more than likely give you a medal. I don't want them to give it to you posthumously, which means you turn yourself in now. Do I make sense?"

He made sense. I told him so and hung up. I was dialing the local police when I happened to glance in the direction of the clerk. I hung up and stepped out of the booth.

"Excuse me," I said, pointing to

he calendar on the wall, "what's today's date. I mean right *now*?"

The clerk glanced up at the calendar, then ripped off the previous day's sheet.

"August twenty third, Signor. I forgot to change it."

I mumbled my thanks and headed out the door. The clerk yelled after me, asking something about my arm. I ignored him. August 3rd: 8-23. Now I knew why they'd wanted the notebook back. *823drop* 0. Pernod was expecting a drop this day, either at ten in the morning or ten in the evening.

I planned to do some dropping myself.



I FOUND a DKW I could drive, crossed the wires, and was off, heading for the open country south east

Rome. It would take some fast driving over rough terrain, but I figured I could make it if I didn't slow down for the towns.

I was well beyond any limitations imposed by pain, hunger or exhaustion. My mind and senses were very sharp, and I was running on the most efficient fuel of all; high octane, one-hundred proof hate. That hate made it a personal thing, a demand that I be the one to put Pernod away. Pernod has used me to kill another human being, and that required a special kind of payment that only I could collect.

Garth's unintentional directions were right on the money. It was 30 when I finally spotted Pernod's

ranch from a bend in the road at the top of a hill, about 20 minutes outside *Cincitta*. It was a spread of about one hundred acres or so, and the air strip ran right up to the rear of the wood and brick farm house. The fields of grain glowed golden in the morning sun. It would have made an idyllic scene were it not for the electrified wire surrounding the whole and an armed guard at the only gate.

I drove the rest of the way down the hill, past the gate. I waved to the stony-faced guard, who stared right through me. I drove around another bend, pulled the car off to the side of the road and sat down in the grass to think.

If there was a drop coming in, I was sure Pernod would be in the

house waiting for it. The problem was getting to him without getting myself killed. The fence was about seven feet high, with an additional foot of barbed wire crowning the top. With two good arms I might have tried to fashion a pole and vault it. In my present condition there was no way. I would have to meet the guard head on.

The area in back of me was wooded. Using my belt, I strapped my useless left arm in close to my body, then stepped back into the trees and made my way back toward the guard. I stopped when I was about twenty yards away, picked up a stone and hurled it at the fence. The wire greeted the stone with a shower of electric sparks and a high-pitched, deadly whine. The guard came running down the road.

He was carrying a sub-machine gun, Russian made, which meant it had probably come from somewhere in the Middle East along with a shipment of drugs. It also meant to me that I was right about the drop that morning. Nothing else would justify the risk of arming a roadside guard with such a weapon; a man standing by a gate with a sub-machine gun would be sure to arouse suspicion, and could blow whatever cover Pernod maintained. No, something — something very big — was coming in, and I suspected it could be Pernod's retirement nest egg.

I had to get close to the man,

and the gun in his hand meant I had very little margin of error. I doubted that another ruse would work; any sound from me and he'd simply spray the trees with machine gun fire. I would have to go to him.

I waited until he was about fifteen yards beyond me, then took a deep breath and exploded from the line of trees. Suddenly, the scene seemed to shift to slow motion inside my brain. I was running low, my right arm pumping wildly, my eyes fixed on the spot at the base of the man's skull I knew I must hit if I was to get him before he got me. But he'd heard me, and his finger was already pressed against the trigger of his weapon as he began to make his turn.

The muzzle of the gun described an arc, bucking, firing a shower of bullets that kicked into the trees, the circle of death coming closer and closer. The muzzle finally zeroed in on me and I left my feet arching my back and thrusting up my arm in a desperate effort for height. An angry swarm of steel whirled by beneath me, and then it was at his head. There was no time to do anything but aim for the kill.

I twisted my body to the side, tucked in my left leg, then lashed out, catching the point of his jaw with my heel. The man's head kicked to one side and I could hear a dull click. He fell as I fell.

I landed on my left side and was

almost swallowed up by a white hot flash of pain that must have ascended all the way from hell. Somehow, I still managed to get to my feet, crouched and ready to move in case I had missed. I hadn't.

The hot barrel of the gun had fallen across the man's arm and was scorching his skin, but he didn't move. The click I had heard had been the sound of the man's neck breaking.

I turned and glanced in the direction of the farm-house. Two figures were running toward the road. Both carried machine guns. I grabbed the dead man's weapon and sprinted back to the shelter of the trees.

They wasted no time examining the body of their dead comrade. The moment they saw him they dropped to the ground on their bellies, their guns pointed into the woods. My mind told me they couldn't possibly hear me breathing; my fear insisted I take no chances. I held my breath. It was like Old Home Week; one man was the one who'd been tailing me in Rome, the other the one who'd slugged me in Venice.

They were patient. It was ten minutes before the older man finally signaled the younger to move out. Both rose to a crouch and began moving off in opposite directions, still keeping their guns trained into the woods on the left and right of me. I crawled forward on my belly up to a large oak at the very edge of the road, then straightened up

and flattened myself against the trunk.

I was not at all sure I could even fire the gun with one arm, at least with the accuracy I would need. Add to that the fact that any move I made would require exquisite timing and you come up with a situation that was not exactly favorable to me. Still, my adrenalin was running low and I had no desire to simply pass out at their feet. Besides, I hadn't come this far to fight a defensive action.

Now the men were about twenty-five yards apart, on opposite sides of the tree, and still moving. In going for an attacking position, I had crawled into a cul-de-sac; sooner or later the angle would be reduced to the point where one of the men would spot me. It was time to make my move.

I knew if I swung on one man the tree would protect me from the other at least for a few seconds. I decided to go after the older, more experienced man first. He was the most dangerous. I braced the gun on my hip and swung to my right.

"Freeze! Both of you! Freeze, or this man dies!"

Of course, they were going to hear none of it. Bullets beat an obscene tattoo on the trunk behind me while the man in front of me tried to drop to one side.

I had anticipated it. I cut loose with a quick burst and the older man's body danced in the air like a bloody rag doll.

Immediately I pressed back against the tree, counted to three, and rolled around the back to the opposite side. The other man had done exactly what I had expected, running down the road to the other side of the tree. I stepped out on my side and pressed the trigger, catching him in the belly, blowing him backwards.

He was dead before he hit the fence but that didn't soothe my sensibilities. I shielded my eyes from the twitching figure stuck with electric glue to the deadly wire mesh.

It occurred to me that I had killed my first man — plus two others for good measure — in the space of the last ten minutes. Oddly enough, I felt strangely unaffected. The antidote to the blood and death around me was the vision of a young man struggling for life while a man plunged a needleful of eternity into his viens.

I figured the odds were better than even that one of the men I had killed had held that needle; the other two had probably held Tommy Barrett down.

But the man responsible for it all was still alive and free. I glanced in the direction of the farm house; it was perfectly quiet. I looked at my watch and found it had been shattered by a stray bullet. I figured the time at around 9:30, which meant I had only a half hour before the plane arrived. I had to get to Pernod before help got to him.

I reloaded one of the guns from

ammunition I found in the older man's pocket, then went through the gate. I knew it would be safer to work my way down through the grain fields, but I figured I couldn't afford the time.

Keeping low, trying to ignore the pain in my left arm, I zig-zagged down the rutted road to the house. I expected to hear — or feel — a volley of shots at any moment, but none came; there was only the lazy singing of crickets. I reached the house and came up hard against the side, just beneath a window. I rested a few moments, sucking air into my lungs, trying to right the landscape around me which had a maddening tendency to spin.

I suspected a bullet between my eyes might be the reward for looking in that particular window so I resisted the impulse and crept around to the other side of the house.

There was another window. I counted slowly to one hundred, then looked in.

Elizabeth Hotaling was tied to a chair, a gag in her mouth. Her face was very pale, her eyes wide and red. Pernod was standing over her, a knife pressed against her throat. It looked as if the arsenal had been depleted.

"I'm here now, Pernod," I said quietly. "I just killed off your zoo." I kept the gun out of sight. I was curious to see if Pernod would move away from the girl. He didn't.

"Get in here, Frederickson," Pernod said tightly. "I want to see the

rest of you. If I don't, I kill the girl."

"You're dumb, Pernod," I said evenly, allowing myself to laugh a few moments for effect. I cut it off quickly as I felt it building to hysteria. I didn't look at the girl. "That girl is the only reason you're alive right now. Besides, she's your girl friend, not mine. Chop her head off if you want. In any case, the second her blood spills, you're dead."

Pernod smiled uncertainly. For a moment I thought he was going to drop the knife. I was wrong. Pernod pressed the point into the soft flesh of the girl's throat and blood blossomed. I groaned inwardly.

"I don't believe you, professor. I don't believe you'd let a young girl die if you could prevent it. But we'll compromise. If I can't see you, I want to see the gun I know you're carrying. I want to see it *now!*"

The knife point dug deeper, fractions of an inch away from the girl's jugular. I pressed the loading lever on the side of the gun and the magazine dropped to the ground. I tossed the rest of the weapon through the window. Pernod reacted as I'd hoped, leaping at the gun, picking it up and aiming it at the window.

It was a few second before he realized there was no magazine. By then I was over the ledge and into the room, standing in front of the girl. Once again, my left arm had come loose from its impromptu sling. I let it dangle.

Pernod laughed. Apparently he thought he was in charge of the situation. He glanced once at the knife he still held as if to reassure himself.

"All right, dwarf," Pernod said without a trace of the manners I remembered, "stick that good arm behind your back and lay down on the floor."

"If you put the knife down I won't kill you, Pernod," I breathed. I straightened up and smiled.

Pernod blinked in disbelief before rage gorged his eyes and he came at me. I ducked under the knife and kicked out at his knees. It was a glancing blow, not enough to cripple him. Pernod stumbled and sat down heavily on the floor, a stunned expression on his face. He stared at me stupidly.

"Stay down, Penrod," I said, fighting down my own blood lust. "Stay down."

I didn't really want him to, and he didn't. Switching the knife to his other hand, Penrod rose and lurched toward me. This time I let him get close, feeling the blade of the knife cutting through my shirt and slicing across the skin over my ribs.

But I had the shot I wanted. I brought the side of my hand down hard on the bridge of the nose, breaking it cleanly. In the same motion, my hand described a lightning arc and drove those shattered fragments of bone up behind Penrod's eyes and into his brain.

It was almost over, and *almost*

was the key word. I couldn't let up now, not even for a moment. If I did, I would be finished but the job wouldn't. I quickly took the gag out of Elizabeth Hotaling's mouth and untied her.

"You — you're the man. He called you —"

"Mongo," I said. "Just Mongo."

She was in shock, which was just as well because I had nothing to say to her. I felt completely empty, devoid of anything I could put into words. I covered her with a blanket and headed for the door, stopping just once to look back and meet her gaze. The look in her eyes stunned me, and I wondered, now, if that was

how other people would also look at me.

A dwarf? Yes. But also a killer, a dangerous man. Never mind the circumstances. Never fool with Mongo. Once I had thought that look was what I wanted. Now I wasn't sure at all, and I wondered how much of myself I had paid for the look in the girl's eyes. And whether it was worth the price.

Clouds had eaten at the sun while I'd been in the house and it looked as if it would rain. I thought I heard the wail of sirens in the distance but I couldn't be sure. It was almost time. I crouched down in the morning to wait for the plane.

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TIGER TALE

by
**GARY
BRANDNER**



*I could see them. One of the three had
betrayed me. Who? Nodding, I drew my gun.*

THE SHARP LITTLE rocks dug into the skin where my wrists and ankles stuck out of the blue prison coveralls. I tried to lie very still, because when I moved trickles of gravel skittered down the side of the pile into the road below me.

I didn't think the three people inside the small office of B&G Sand

and Gravel Company could hear me, but I was careful anyway. I shifted the rifle slightly so it was pointed at the door where they would come out.

I couldn't take a chance on a shot through the window. I caught glimpses of Homer Barstow's heavy-jowled head, and Phil Griffin's lean,

dark one, and the bobbing blonde curls of Betty Magill.

I didn't have time to aim and fire. I wanted to be sure the right one died.

In my mind I followed the movements of the people in the brightly lighted office. I had put in a few of these late nights myself when I worked as a clerk for Barstow and Griffin. We all would stay after hours when a sudden job came up and the contractor needed truckloads of rock in a hurry. Most of the truckers paid in cash on the spot. And that is what led to my trouble.

It had been about midnight on one of those late jobs when suddenly Mr. Barstow yelled that there was ten thousand dollars gone from the safe. We had been especially busy, and there were truck drivers and salesmen and other people in and out all day.

At first we thought somebody walking through the office must have seen that the safe was not locked. And simply helped himself to the money.

The police thought different. They were in the office nosing around the next day. It was easy to see that they suspected one of us who worked there of stealing the money. That narrowed it down to Barstow and Griffin, the partners, Betty Magill, the secretary, and me, Elliot Cox. They took each of us down to the police station for questioning.

I guess they couldn't pin it on any of us, but they weren't about to stop

trying. There were a lot of suspicious looks flashed at the office in the next few days. It seemed that most of them were aimed at me.

Betty Magill stayed farther away from me than usual. She hadn't had much to say to me since our only date a couple of months back. When she got a look at the rooming house where I lived, with its cooking smells and no locks on the doors, she dropped me fast.

Betty still hoped to get a tumble from one of the partners, but Phil Griffin was happily married, and old Barstow, who we all knew played around, was smart enough not to dip his pen in company ink.

Homer Barstow never did like me much. He thought my hair was too long, and he didn't care for mustaches. If he had known about my time in the hospital, he would never have hired me in the first place. I kept that a secret until it came out at the trial.

Later I heard him say, "That's what we get for hiring a damn psycho."

Even so, old Barstow would have fired me more than once if Mr. Griffin hadn't stood up for me. Sometimes after old Barstow chewed me out for something, Mr. Griffin would come by and wink at me and say, "Don't let Homer get you down. His bark is worse than his bite. I'll talk to him and get him cooled off."

Then the money was stolen, and everything went sour. First, there

was the old stray cat that came to my window and that I had been hiding in my room for several days. He was a lot of company, and I was really starting to get attached to him.

Then one night he didn't show up at his usual time, and I never saw him again.

That was the night the police came for me. Maybe that old cat knew something.

They came in with a search warrant, and in the back of my closet they found a hundred dollars of the stolen money. The small stack of bills was paper-clipped to a sheet from old Barstow's memo pad the way he did it when he put money into the safe.

The sheet had figures on it in Barstow's handwriting, so there was no mistaking where the money came from.

I heard later that the police got an anonymous phone call telling them where to look.

After I was arrested old Barstow's opinion of me didn't get any better. He came down to the jail to see me the next day. He had to strain to make his face go into something like a smile.

"Listen, Elliot," he said, "if you'll just tell us what you did with the rest of the money, maybe we can work something out to help you."

"I can't tell you where the money is because I didn't take it," I said.

"The police found part of it in

your room." His face started to get red.

"I can't help that. I don't know how it got there."

He gave up on the smile. "Don't you understand what kind of trouble you're in?"

"You bet I do, Mr. Barstow."

"And you're going to stick to the story that you don't know where the money in your room came from?"

"It's the only story I have."

He slammed his hand against his leg then, and went away grumbling to himself.

Mr. Griffin was more help. He brought a lawyer around for me, a young guy with sideburns who acted like he believed me.

Even Betty Magill came to see me. She told me not to worry, that Mr. Griffin's lawyer would get me off for sure.

But he didn't.

After I was convicted there was some talk of sending me back to the hospital, but I was sentenced to prison instead. About then people's attitudes toward me changed for the worse.

Not old Barstow, of course. He had me pegged from the beginning for a thief, or worse. He didn't even bother to talk to me after I was sentenced.

Mr. Griffin said a few words about how sorry he was. He kept looking at his watch while he talked to me.

I asked Betty Magill if I could

write to her, and she told me to forget it. She said I'd be better off writing to my cat.

I didn't take to prison life at all. It isn't really the way they make it out in the movies, it's worse. And the guards aren't the ones you have to worry about. It's the cons. Some of the things they did to each other I couldn't believe.

Almost as soon as I got there I started thinking about breaking out. That and trying to puzzle out who put the stolen money in my room kept my mind busy.

Then, after almost a year, I was in the prison library one day and everything came clear. There was a short story in the Los Angeles paper with the headline: *Sportsman Bags Bengal Trophy*.

It was about my old boss Homer Barstow, who had just come back from India after killing his first tiger on one of those hunts from the back of an elephant. He told the reporter, "I hear the tiger is a vanishing cat, so I'm glad I got mine before they're all gone."

I knew suddenly who really stole the money, then got worried and hid part of it in my room to put the blame on me. I knew I could never prove it, so I would have to punish the guilty one myself.

Less than a week later I escaped and hitchhiked to Los Angeles. I broke into a sporting goods store and stole a rifle and ammunition. I loaded the rifle and hid it in the gravel pile at B&G. For five straight

nights I sneaked down there waiting for a time when they would work late. This was it.

Now through the window I saw Phil Griffin get up and stretch. Then they all started moving around inside.

I sighted down the rifle to the door and curled my finger around the trigger.

The door opened, and the light inside the office switched off. I waited for them to step one by one into the glow from the bare bulb outside the door.

Homer Barstow came out first. His face was even jowlier than a year ago.

Phil Griffin stepped out next and held the door open. He was smiling and saying something to Betty Magill, who followed him. I aimed carefully between the eyes of the thief and squeezed the trigger.

If I hadn't seen that story about old Barstow and his tiger, I might never have figured out who framed me. It was the part about the vanishing cat that did it. My old cat had vanished too, the night before I was arrested — the night somebody came to my room and planted the money.

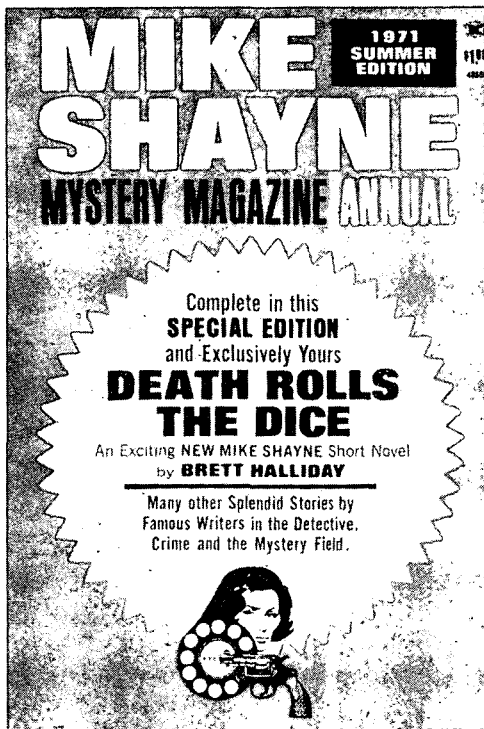
I should have known who it was when the all came to see me after my trial. Nobody knew I had a cat in my room.

Nobody could have known, except the one who was there to hide the money.

Nobody but dead Betty Magill.

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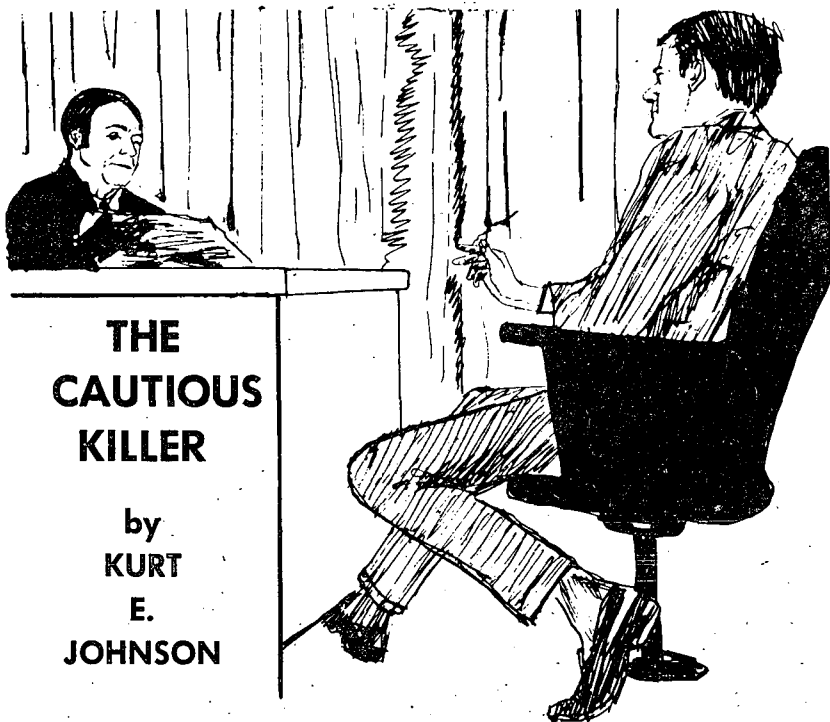
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THE CAUTIOUS KILLER

by
KURT
E.
JOHNSON

Made for killing, they were, each a master of his dark trade. So — only one could leave alive . . .

THE BARELY HEARD muted utterances of Garrett Atchison's .380 Beretta performed the needed exercise in his present contract.

Atchison slipped the silencer off the muzzle and pocketed it. The virile automatic coozied neatly back inside the solid-black holster hanging from his belt and covered by the coat of his grey three-hundred-dollar suit.

The job was done.

After the assassin picked up the required remuneration for the job from the bus terminal's rental locker where his employer had left it, he climbed aboard the Continental bus and tried to prepare himself for the six hundred mile overland trek which would take him to his next vocational endeavor.

Atchison didn't relish going the scenic route, but he had his reasons, and they more than justified the dis-

comfort. It was no longer safe to try to fly without leaving the Beretta and its valuable silencer behind. The mania of airline hijacking had left some undesirable results for the professional assassins' labor force. No longer could the death merchants carry their favorite tools of the trade on to planes without considerable risk of detection.

In terms of cautionary measures, Atchison took as few risks as possible. He rarely drove an automobile unless it was absolutely necessary. The need to remain unphotographed and unidentified in public records caused him to carry a false identity via a bogus driver's license which he could use in a pinch — but only in a pinch.

The big bus eased into the terminal in Houston and Atchison stepped out, carrying his compact brown leather grip which held the Beretta. He walked at a brisk pace to the J. Murchison building and scanned the directory until he found what he needed. *Downer & Co. 615*. The elevator wheeled him to the sixth floor.

Floyd Downer responded to his receptionist by asking that Atchison be sent in. Downer was too nervous for small talk and obviously wanted to get right down to business.

"Mr. Atchison, you know why I've asked you to come here. I have a job for you to do."

"That's what the contact said."

Atchison was miffed at Downer's

a business man Downer had a tough time keeping his cool.

"Mr. Atchison, I want you to kill my wife. What's your price?"

Atchison neither blinked nor flinched like some men in his profession might have done. The notion of killing a woman, though it would have bothered him years before, bounced off his vocational immunity. He checked the intercom to make sure accidental communication with the receptionist had not been made.

"In your case, Mr. Downer, twenty thousand dollars," he said. "I know it might sound high, but a professional job demands a professional price. Execution is guaranteed with our agreement held in confidence to insure your immunity, even in the unlikely event that I am captured and charged." To some it would have sounded like all so much talk, but Garrett Atchison meant every word. This assassin backed his contract with integrity.

"It's all right," Downer replied. "Can you do it right away?"

"At the earliest opportunity."

"How do you want the money?"

"Five thousand now in small bills, the balance afterward."

"I have to leave town right away. I'm prepared to pay it all now if that's all right."

"No argument here," Atchison said. He was curious about this abnormal part of the routine. Downer was obviously a man in a deep sweat

have thought that his getting out of town was a matter of life and death.

"I have to leave town late this afternoon on the company plane, flying to Kansas City. I figured it would be a good idea for me not to be around anyway. Emma will be at the house by herself tonight. The maid is out of town for a couple of days. Just do the job, and make it look like a burglary. Knock a few things around, tear open the wall safe behind the big picture in the living room. It's a cheap unit and you can spring it easily with a screwdriver."

"That's it?"

"That's it. I'll get your money."

Downer counted out twenty thousand dollars in fives, tens, twenties and fifties. He had drawn the money out of a safe deposit box the day before. All avenues of guilt were being carefully covered. There'd be no bank record of withdrawal to confirm payoff of the death contract. Downer had been salting the money away in small amounts for a long time. The decision to kill his wife had not been made in haste.

Atchison thought about the receptionist as he left. She could make the connection between his visit with Downer on the day of the murder, but only in the event that he be detained and thereby captured. And he had no intention of being detained.

While Downer climbed aboard a private plane at the airport, the as-



watched the evening news. The description and picture of Emma that Downer had provided would insure that the right person turn out as the victim. After a quick call to reserve a rental car for the evening, Atchison closed his eyes and waited. For a pro, it was like going through the routine of brushing teeth or combing hair.

The hour drew toward eleven and Atchison picked up the car. The details had been covered well. By paying the hotel in advance, he was able to check out unnoticed simply by leaving the key in the door and going down the back way. He identified himself at the car rental counter with the bogus license. A bus was scheduled to leave town for Dallas within an hour after the job would be completed. The whole setup was reeking with routine. The fact that full payment preceded carrying out the contract simplified

The Downer house was bathed in near darkness. Atchison parked the car two blocks away and stalked to the rear door. He had already attired his hands in tight-fitting leather gloves. A quick pick of the lock netted entry, and he felt his way through the dimly-lit kitchen and den. Water could be heard running upstairs. With the Beretta unholstered and the silencer intact, the hunter made the top of the stairs and gained a clear view of the open bathroom door.

Emma Downer's head was visible above the opaque shower glass. Her face writhed in silent horror at the same time that Atchison confirmed his victim's identification.

The pane caved in as the well-placed shots created an instant corpse.

The job was done.

Or was it?

The next revelation to be made to Garrett Atchison would be startling. It would send him spiraling down a staircase of coincidence which would turn this simple death contract into a confusing situation indeed!

The screwdriver, when applied to the safe behind the large picture in the living room, causing the face to neatly snap off. Inside Atchison found a shoe box, neatly wrapped in brown paper and tied securely with twine. He tucked it under his arm and slid out the same way that he had entered.

The car was undisturbed. After

driving a short distance beyond the Parkway, he turned into an outdoor movie theater and drove to the last row of cars. He pulled his pen light from his suit pocket and opened the package.

It contained fifteen thousand dollars in small bills along with a note, thanking the recipient, whoever he was, for a job well done. Scrawled on the envelope which contained the note were the words *Main and Dowling — nine p.m. Thursday. Put in trash barrel.*

Atchison suspected something strange about the life of Floyd Downer, but at the moment it all seemed just too incredible. It was risky to stay in town, but things were getting too interesting to pull out now. A new hotel room and its color TV provided a partial answer on Thursday morning's newscast. The private plane of Downer & Co., en route to Kansas City, had exploded while over the Oklahoma-Texas state line and crashed, killing all the passengers.

It slowly began to make sense. Atchison was holding the payoff for Floyd Downer's murder too. Any greedy man would have taken the money and run. But Atchison was more professional than greedy. He would accomplish the payoff drop, and then embark on a mission of his own.

Thursday night came quickly. At ten minutes before nine Atchison tossed the rewrapped bundle containing fifteen thousand dollars

and a note of thanks into the trash barrel at the corner of Main and Dowling. At ten minutes past nine, Mrs. Downer's killer watched Thompson Smith, another assassin-for-hire, pluck the bundle from its container and march north on Main toward the Hotel Houston.

Though Smith was a paid assassin, he failed to notice Atchison following him. The pair continued half a block apart until they reached the hotel. Atchison observed which room Smith entered on the third floor. A half-hour's wait gave Smith time to lie down and close his eyes comfortably. Atchison monitored the room from the door and detected silence. He inserted a pick into the door latch and sprang into the room just as Smith raised himself to his elbows. The Beretta was drawn, the silencer once again intact.

"What the hell—"

"Simmer down, Mr. Smith. My name's Garrett Atchison." The identification instantly rang a bell for Thompson. He realized at once that he was looking into the gun of one of the most efficient of the underworld assassins.

"What's your gripe with me?"

"I thought you might like to have a little talk about the Downer family."

"Oh yeah? What about the Downer family?" Smith wasn't about to trap himself in a lie. Honor among killers was even greater a virtue than honor among thieves.

"Who hired you to kill Floyd Downer?"

"As if you don't already know: Why'd she pick you to make the drop of the payoff?"

"She didn't. I killed her last night and found the money in the safe."

"You what?" Thompson was obviously shaken.

"I executed a contract for her husband. Apparently she hired you to do the same thing to him."

"Well, I'll be damned! Now all the witnesses are gone. What's the gun for, Atchison? Don't you see? We're protected now even better than if just one of them were alive."

"Sure, it's all over, except for one minor detail."

"What's that?" Thompson eyed the Beretta nervously.

"Just a certain trait of the trade known as professional excellence. Tell me, why did you use a bomb?"

"Because," said Thompson, "it put the actual kill over four hundred miles from here. It gave me plenty of time to make the payoff pickup and hit the high road long before a bomb would even be suspected."

"Did the payoff include killing the crew and other members of the flight list?"

"It didn't exclude them. Look, man, I had a job to do. I did it, and I did it in a way to protect myself the most and still make sure that the job would be done."

Atchison sighed slowly as Thompson stood and walked to the window and looked out. The humid Houston

air started to drop a faint drizzle as the sounds of cars below meshed into morose replays of redundant sounds.

Thompson Smith was about to ask Garrett Atchison if he didn't think it would be a good idea to put the gun away and forget this foolishness about people who happened to get in the way of a kill contract. And, of course, Atchison would insist that it was an amateurishly botched-up job.

The Beretta's barrel maintained its parallel alignment with the floor and ceiling. Atchison considered it much more than a botched-up job; it was a disgusting lack of profes-

sionalism which wasn't true to the contract. The profession of Garrett Atchison, assassin, was being compromised and diluted of quality by men like Thompson Smith and his botched-up jobs.

Atchison's .380 Beretta performed its perfect task again. *Thump! Thump! Thump!*

He left the fifteen thousand dollars which belonged to Thompson inside the hotel room. To take money he hadn't rightfully earned would make him nothing more than a petty thief.

And Garrett Atchison was anything other than a petty thief. He was a professional.



Next Month's Headline Action Stories



THE BLUEBLOOD PEOPLE by MAX VAN DERVEER

PILLAR OF THE COMMUNITY by THOMAS N. SCORTIA

BIG JIM'S POCKET by RICHARD DEMING

THE SOUND OF SCREAMING by EDWARD D. HOCH

THE PATTERN OF MURDER by JEFFREY M. WALLMANN

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THE DEADLY FARE

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

"Follow that cab," the girl said. She was little and pretty and used to having men do her bidding. But then we swung around a corner on two wheels, I saw who was in the other cab and I knew. Our destination was sudden death—mine!

SHORTLY BEFORE NOON Jess Hart was cruising Wilshire Boulevard, the cab empty, when he was caught by a red light directly in front of a bank. Then he heard a tattoo of heels running and glanced toward the bank.

A blonde woman was hurrying toward him, waving frantically. She fell against the front door, pointed a trembling finger up the street.

She gasped, "Driver, follow that cab!"

She jerked the door open and hopped in.

It was all so quick, Jess Hart didn't get a good look at her. But he saw enough to know that she was young, shapely, good-looking. And she wore a hat that flopped about

on her head like a purple, feathered pancake.

Taken by surprise, Hart did her bidding. He rocked the cab away from the signal as it changed to green and made a screaming right turn. The other cab was Number Eighteen Three Oh.

Abruptly Hart laughed aloud. He'd read stories in which someone said, "Follow that cab!" He'd seen it in movies, on the TV, but it had never happened to him.

Wait just a damn minute! What was going on?

Jess Hart was plagued by a quick temper. It started to simmer. He slowed the cab and glanced up into the rear view mirror.

His passenger leaned forward to



pound on the seat with her fist. "Don't let him out of your sight!"

"Just a minute, lady. Let's clear something up here. What's this all about?"

"There's a bank robber in that cab! He held up the bank while I was in there!"

Hart took his foot off the accelerator. The cab yawed toward the curb. "A bank robber! Lady, I'm no cop!"

"But he's got a gun! The other driver—he might shoot him. Don't you care about your buddy?"

"My buddy! That's a large laugh," Hart muttered. Belatedly, he had recognized the other cab. It was driven by Red Collins, a dirty-neck slob, a general no-account, a wom-

anizer. The only hack driver in the fleet who liked Red Collins was Red himself, and Hart wasn't too sure about that.

Hart said softly, "Besides, he's a guzzler."

"You mean he drinks?"

"No, lady, I mean he steals fares from the rest of us." In fact, they'd had words about it two days ago after Collins had stolen a buck-sixty fare right from under his nose, Hart promising to punch Red's face for him if it ever happened again. "Like he hears a dispatcher give an order over the radio. Red beats the other driver to the address and steals the load. Things like that."

"He doesn't sound like a very nice man."

"He's not someone you'd want to take home to your dear old mother, lady, believe me."

Jess Hart switched on the radio. A company rule stated that drivers should keep their radios on at all times, but Hart didn't. The dispatcher had a voice like a rusty file and all that chatter annoyed him. Besides, he figured he'd been around long enough to ignore the minor rules so long as he obeyed the major ones.

As he waited for the radio to warm up, Hart had to wonder what he was doing in such a kinky situation. He was no hero. In his youth he had been a Golden Gloves contender. All it had gotten him was a slightly caulflowered ear and a broken nose, never properly reset, neith-

er of which added much to his good looks. In ten years of driving a hack, the closest he'd come to violence had been dealing with a surly drunk.

Now he was chasing a bank robber!

He picked up the mike and depressed the button. "Wash Nine, Wash Nine, this is M Four Two. Black. Black."

Jess Hart fervently hoped that Red Collins also had his radio switched off. If his passenger heard himself being discussed, he would likely be most unhappy.

The radio crackled. "Check, M Four Two. I read you loud and clear. All units stand by. Emergency. Come in, M Four Two. Come in, please."

"Am following Cab Eighteen Three Oh. Has a holdup man in his cab. His passenger just held up the bank at Melrose and Wilshire."

The silence held for half a minute. Hart could imagine the consternation his announcement must have caused in the dispatch room.

"Does M Three Oh know his passenger is a holdup man?"

"Now how should I know?" Jess Hart growled. He depressed the button and said laconically, "You'd better ask Eighteen Three Oh."

There was another silence, longer this time. Cab Eighteen Three Oh was still two blocks ahead.

"M Three Oh does not answer radio. Wash Nine is contacting police, M Four Two. Keep M Three Oh in sight and call Wash Nine at

once if anything happens. M Four Two, do not take chances. Repeat, do not take chances!"

"Don't fret, Wash Nine dear," Hart muttered. He turned down the volume. "M Four Two is no bloody hero."

At that moment Eighteen Three Oh made a sharp right turn.

His passenger screamed in his ear, "Don't lose that cab, driver! Step on it!"

"What do you think I'm doing, lady? This thing is up to fifty!"

They made the corner in a matter of seconds. Hart took it on screeching tires. And almost ran bang into the rear of Eighteen Three Oh idling along at about ten miles an hour. Hart bore down on his brakes. He caught a glimpse of a face through the rear window. Then Eighteen Three Oh picked up speed and pulled away from him. Hart held back, cursing under his breath. Red Collins must think this was some sort of private eye game like on the TV.

Eighteen Three Oh went straight for three blocks, then made another turn. Hart swung his cab around the corner after him. He saw an arm come through a side window. He heard a cracking sound, then another. Realization hit him like a club.

"Duck, lady! Down between the seats! The go-and-so's shooting at us!"

The lady got down obediently. The holdup man fired again.



"He's a lousy shot, I'll say that for him," Jess Hart muttered. "Can't even hit the rig."

Eighteen Three Oh made another quick turn. And once again Hart took the corner after it, staying back a good distance. They were speeding down a quiet residential street, with tall palms on each side like stately sentinels.

Jess Hart felt a lurch of panic. There was a school a few blocks away, and it was about time for the lunch hour. At this speed, with kids all over the street, it could mean disaster. He wondered where the cops were. Never around when needed. But let him fudge on a red light, and they were Johnny-on-the-spot.

Abruptly, Eighteen Three Oh began to swerve erratically, going from curb to curb. Then, as it went

through an intersection, the rear door popped open and a man leaped from the still-moving vehicle. He staggered a few steps and fell down, but picked himself up at once. He raced down a side street without looking back.

Hart gazed after him uncertainly, then looked at the moving cab ahead. He saw that Red Collins was slumped over the wheel. Probably knocked out. And the school was coming up.

Jess Hart made his decision. He stepped on the gas.

Eighteen Three Oh was moving at about fifteen miles an hour. It was following a zig-zag course, but Red's position over the wheel kept the front wheels in a reasonably straight line. Fortunately there were no other cars on the street.

Hart speeded up until he was thirty feet ahead, then cut in and slowed gradually. With one eye on the rear view mirror, the other on the street ahead, he tried to gauge the speed of both cabs. Shortly Eighteen Three Oh smacked into Hart's bumper. It was a hard wallop, snapping Hart's neck. The blonde passenger yelped. The second bump was a little easier. The third . . .

The third time Hart managed to maintain contact. Gently braking, he brought both cabs to a halt.

He let his breath escape with a sigh. Back there, when the shots began, he'd been frightened. He still

was. Fear clogged his throat like an ice cube.

A chattering like that of an annoyed chipmunk from the blonde in the back seat aroused him from the stupor. Dimly, he became aware of a horn blowing insistently.

He pressed down on the door handle and got out, ignoring his passenger. He walked back to Eighteen Three Oh. Red Collins was still slumped over the wheel. His cap had fallen off; his hair stood up like rusty filings. The horn was blaring.

Jess Hart bent down to the window level. "Red? You all right, Red?"

He touched him gently on the shoulder. Collins toppled like a deck of stacked cards, falling face down across the seat. The horn stopped.

Jess Hart leaned in through the window. There was a small knife driven to the hilt just under Red's left shoulder blade. Hart searched for a pulse. There was none. Red Collins was dead. No doubt about that.

Hart straightened up and looked back down the palm-lined street. Back there somewhere was the dirty so-and-so who had stuck a knife in Red Collins. Rage boiled up across his blurred vision like a bloody mist.

He reached in and turned off the ignition, then broke for Cab Eighteen Four Two in a dead run. His passenger, he noted, was gone. He didn't bother looking for her, but got behind the wheel, made a screaming

U-turn and headed back up the street. At the corner where he'd last seen the holdup man, he made a left turn and rocked the rig up the street.

The right hand door flew open, and he had to slow down until he could lean across and close it.

Twice now he'd reported the faulty door latch to the repair shop, and it still wasn't fixed.

He sped on, slowing at each intersection and looking carefully both ways.

Two blocks, five, seven . . .

Then he saw him, legging it down the street. Jess Hart slowed, debating how he should do it. The man did have a gun . . .

Hart was now only a block behind the robber, who had not looked around.

Of course, he could drive the cab up over the curb and run him down. It would be like potting a sitting duck.

But the cab company would likely take a dim view of one of their rigs being used as a deadly weapon, even in a good cause.

Jess Hart tromped on the gas. He shot ahead about twenty feet, then brought the cab to a jolting halt. He jerked back on the emergency brake and left the rig in a flying leap.

He caught a glimpse of a white, gaping face saw the gun come up to bear. He hit the man in the midsection with his shoulder. He heard the roar of the gun but he flew past untouched. He stopped short and

turned around. The holdup man was flat on his back, the gun several yards away on the sidewalk. The man looked at the gun, then up at Hart.

Jess Hart moved in, crouching slightly, head up. The bandit sprang to his feet, advanced to meet Hart.

Hart got his first good look at him. He was young, the cleancut type, not at all the ratty-looking individual commonly associated with criminal activities. In fact, he was downright handsome.

So Hart planted a hard left in the middle of all that handsomeness. The man staggered slightly, then squared off and let Hart have it. Jess hit the pavement with a thud. The guy had a right like Joe Louis in his prime.

Shaking his head dazedly, Hart started to climb to his feet. The holdup man was coming at him again, one hand raised high. Light glinted off metal. He had picked up the gun!

Jess Hart tried to duck, but he was far too slow. The gun barrel caught him alongside the head, and darkness descended at noon . . .

It seemed there had been no bank holdup. Certainly none had been reported. Nobody had seen a man jump from Red Collins' cab. And not a soul would admit to seeing Jess Hart's blonde passenger.

But there were any number of witnesses eager to testify that they had seen Hart straighten up from

into his own cab and drive away at high speed.

"But, sergeant," Jess Hart said plaintively, "the guy fired at me! Why would he do that if he hadn't held up a bank?"

"There were no scratches or broken glass on your cab," Sergeant Lynd said. "He was such a lousy shot he couldn't even hit something as big as a cab?"

They always came back to that.

Three hours or more had passed since Hart had been whacked on the head. For two of those hours he had been alone with Sergeant Lynd in this tiny room, gun-metal in color, a table and two chairs, an overhead light, filled with a brown cloud of smoke from the sergeant's cigar.

Just like the third degree rooms on the TV. Except there had been no third degree. Sergeant Lynd, fortyish, overweight, with a bad complexion and tiny black eyes, hadn't laid a finger on Hart. He was patient, the soul of courtesy, but the endless questions were as relentless and painful as a dentist's drill.

Jess Hart's head ached abominably. He was hungry, having missed lunch, and he was angry. Now he touched the lump on his head and winced. "If you think I'm lying, how'd I get this?"

"You tell me, Mr. Hart."

"I've been telling you and telling you!" Hart yelled. With an effort

"What reason would I have to kill Red?"

"I understand he wasn't too well-liked. I understand you quarreled with him just two days ago."

"Some quarrel. We had a few words, yes. He stole a fare off me. I've got a lousy temper but—" Jess Hart sighed. "I killed a man over a buck-sixty fare? Come on, sergeant!"

"Men have killed for less reason." The sergeant picked up a cold cigar stub from the overflowing ashtray on the table and lit it. A stench crept into the room. "You know, Mr. Hart, there have been a number of bank robberies in the city over the past six months. We haven't a clue so far as to who, but we think it is the same man each time. There is one thing. There's never a getaway car. Several witnesses have spotted a cab in the vicinity. Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"Odd?" Jess Hart stared. "What's that supposed to mean to me?"

Sergeant Lynd stared back blandly.

"I just thought you might find it interesting, Mr. Hart." He gestured suddenly. "You may go. You're free to leave. But don't take a long trip. I'll be wanting to talk to you again."

His appetite was gone. Leaving the police building, Jess Hart stopped at a lunch counter, ordered a hamburger and a cup of coffee. His stomach rebelled when the hamburger was served. The police building

tinctive odor of all police stations. Now everything, even the hamburger, had taken on a jail stench.

He pushed the burger aside and settled for the coffee.

The day was nearly gone, two hours left of his shift, and he had taken in ten dollars, less than half of his day's book.

Hart decided to blow the rest of the day. He spent a dime to call his garage superintendent and got Red's address. He was surprised at the section of town. It was hardly the neighborhood for a hundred-buck-a-week hack driver. He drove out there.

He was even more surprised when he saw the house. It had to cost upwards of forty thousand. The woman who answered the door was a small, washed-out brunette. Her face was puffy from weeping, her eyes dull.

Of course. The police had told her about Red.

Jess Hart suddenly wondered what the hell he was doing there. He said, "I'm sorry about Red, Mrs. Collins." He shuffled his feet. "I worked with him."

"Thank you," the woman said emptily.

"They'll find the so-and-so who did it, you can be sure."

Mrs. Collins merely looked at him.

The silence grew until it became painful. Hart finally blurted, "Nice house you've got here. How long have you had it?"

"We moved in three months ago.

And yes, we like it." Her face crumpled, eyes flooding with fresh tears. She gestured wordlessly and slammed the door in his face.

Jess Hart stared at the closed door, scrubbing a hand back and forth along his jaw.

What the hell was he doing here?

Slowly, he started back toward the cab parked at the curb. Then he saw the attached two-car garage, overhead door open, and he veered that way. There was one car, a new Mustang. Hart glanced around. Insofar as he could tell, he was unobserved.

He strolled into the garage. He didn't know what he expected to find, if anything at all. There was a work bench littered with tools, several cabinets, doors open, altogether a rat's jumble. Red Collins hadn't been very neat.

Jess Hart poked idly through everything. One cabinet was locked. He managed to open it with a screwdriver. He prowled through it. In a shoe box, buried under some rags, he found a bundle of thick, oblong pieces of paper. Each held a number, the same number. The numerals were black, the background yellow, the exact color of his cab, and the backs of the paper oblongs were adhesive.

Jess Hart stood whistling tunelessly, bouncing the bundle in his hand.

Should he call Sergeant Lynd, alert the police?

It would probably be a mistake. How could he prove he had found

the bundle in Red's garage? The police would have only his word for it and could easily jump to the conclusion that he had planted it there. Hart doubted very much that Red's wife knew anything. Even if she did, she would likely swear she didn't.

He returned the bundle to the shoe box, replaced the lid and walked out of the garage with it under his arm. It was late now, after six. He was two hours overdue with the cab. He started it and drove across town to his garage. Before he turned in, Jess Hart flipped his meter on. He told the superintendent he had a fare who wanted to hire him for a couple more hours.

"So where is he?" asked the superintendent.

"Oh, he stopped off at a bar up the street," Hart said negligently. "He told me to come back for him in a few minutes. I thought I'd report in and pick up something from my locker."

The superintendent shrugged, accepting Hart's story. Hart went into the locker room. As he'd hoped, it was empty at this time of the evening. From his own locker he got a tire iron and used it to pry the Yale lock off Red's locker.

The locker was a jumble of junk, also. But Hart finally found what he was looking for, a pair of commercial license plates. And he found something else, an unexpected dividend. Taped to the inside of the locker door was a snapshot of a woman. Hart had been about to

slam the door when he did a doubletake.

It wasn't Red's wife. It was the woman who had sent him chasing after Red's cab. She was bareheaded, no kinky hat this time, but there was no doubt it was the same woman.

Jess Hart tore the snapshot off the door. And on the back of it was scrawled an address.

The address was across town, a garage apartment off an alley. There was a name on the mailbox: *Arlene Jeffers*.

There was no answer to his ring. After a brief debate with himself, Hart parked the cab up the alley where he could see the apartment and settled down to wait.

He listened morosely to the meter ticking away. It would cost him to sit here for a couple of hours on what was probably a fool's errand, but he had to have something on the meter to show for his day's work, which would now include overtime. He couldn't use his own car; he didn't own one. He got enough traffic pushing a cab all day.

After an hour Hart began to get sleepy. He dozed.

All of a sudden he awoke with a start. The front door across from him had opened, and someone was getting into the cab.

Jess Hart squinted in the dimness. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. It was him, the hold-up man with the cleancut features.

And a gun. The gun was pointing right at Jess Hart.

Hart sighed softly. So much for his detective ability. What was the penalty for a cop going to sleep on the job and letting a suspect get the drop on him?

From the look of the situation, there seemed little doubt as to the penalty he would pay for going to sleep.

"But your meter's already running," the man with the gun said. "Who you waiting for, cab?"

"Would you believe me if I said you?"

"No way. There's no way you could know about me. It's Arlene, isn't it? That skirt-crazy Collins left her name and address around some place. Couldn't have been on his person or it would be the fuzz instead of you."

Then he saw the shoe box on the seat. He pulled it to him and flipped off the lid. He took out the package of numbers and the license plates, then the picture. He studied them in the light from the dash and whistled softly.

"Perfect! Couldn't be better. This sets up the whole thing beautifully." He dropped everything back except the picture. "This explains how you knew about Arlene, huh, cab?" He tucked the picture away in his coat pocket, motioned with the gun. "Start this thing up."

Hart didn't move. He sighed again. "You and Red, you've been working together, right? You hold up a bank and Red is waiting on the street in his rig, with those phon-



ies covering the real cab numbers and different license plates. You hop in and Red drives away, a cab with a fare. Who'd ever suspect a cab for a getaway car? Then, for some reason, you decided Red had to go and you set me up as a patsy for the cops."

"You're sharp, you know that? Too sharp to be pushing a hack. It was beautiful while it lasted, until Collins got greedy and demanded a bigger cut. And all he had to do was drive the damn cab. He threatened to go to the fuzz. I knew he wouldn't, but nobody threatens me!"

"How did he get involved? You hook him through the woman? What's her name, Arlene? Red always was a sucker for a broad."

"Right again, cab. And you know something? He wanted a bigger cut

to spend on her! I'm going to have a word with Arlene before we go into business again. Now, no more question and answer." The man gestured again with the gun. "Let's move!"

Jess Hart started the cab and drove toward the mouth of the alley. "So what's next on the program?"

"Can't you guess? You're the smart one. The fuzz is looking for a cab driver in connection with the holdups. You'll have a fatal accident, they'll find the phony stick-on cab numbers and extra license plates in your cab. That'll tie it all together for them."

The man gave Hart explicit instructions about where to drive. "And don't get any bright ideas about jumping out and making a run for it. I'm good with this piece of iron. Of course, you have only my word for it. Unless you want to test me." He was sitting with his back against the opposite door, one knee drawn up on the seat, the gun resting on it.

Hart drove in grim silence. But he was coming to a slow boil, remembering that one punch that had floored him earlier. The situation looked about as hopeless as it could get. He knew the location they were heading for. It was a deserted section, an area of oil refineries, no houses, few businesses, and the street crossed a concrete river bed, dry this time of the year.

Cab Eighteen Four Two was go-

wreckage in that river bed with Hart trapped inside it, probably knocked cold from another rap on the head with the gun.

Now he saw the bridge under a street light three blocks ahead. Whatever would happen had to happen there.

"Pretty lonely out here, isn't it? Wonder how I'll ever get back?" The man across the seat chuckled. "Suppose I'll be able to hail a cruising cab way out here, cab?"

Jess Hart's smoldering rage exploded. The cab was traveling about thirty-five and was just entering an intersection. Hart stood on the brakes and swung the wheel hard left. Tires screamed as the rig took the corner on two wheels. As Hart had anticipated, the bandit's weight thrown against the faulty lock sprung the door open, and the holdup man was ejected from the cab like a projectile.

Jess Hart brought the cab to a jarring halt, leaped out and ran back up the street. The bandit was on his hands and knees directly under a street light, dazedly looking around for the gun.

At the sound of Hart's pounding footsteps, he glanced up. By the time Hart reached him he was on his feet. He threw a looping right. Hart blocked it with his left and drove his right fist into the man's midsection. His stomach was as hard as leather, but the blow drew a gasp from him. His eyes were dull, un-

focused

ing to end up a mass of flaming Jess Hart hit him again, a glanc-

ing blow alongside the jaw. The bandit fell back a step, shaking his head. His gaze focused on Hart. The blow had merely served to clear his head. He charged.

They stood toe to toe, slugging. Hart managed to avoid most of the blows to the face, but his chest and midsection began to feel as though a mule had been at him. The bandit hit like a sledgehammer, and he was younger, in much better condition. Hart knew he would have to end it quickly.

Then the other man ducked a blow to the jaw and closed in. Hart sensed rather than saw the knee coming up. He managed to twist aside just in time, the knee barely missing his groin. Even so, his thigh went numb.

Jess Hart roared, "A dirty fighter to boot!"

The missed knee blow had thrown the other momentarily off balance. Hart set himself and chopped a short, hard right with all his strength. He connected with the point of the other's chin.

The holdup man was sent staggering back, arms flailing wildly. He

went down, landing heavily on his side. He made an effort to rise, then slumped back.

Jess Hart stood over him, breathing in gasps, but the bandit didn't move.

Hart found the gun a few feet away in some weeds. He got in the cab and backed it up opposite the unconscious man. Sitting in the right seat where he could watch him, he turned on the radio and let it warm up.

He stared at the unmoving figure. With the blonde's name and address, the fake numbers and extra license plates Red Collins had hidden away, and the unconscious hold-up man, he had a neat package to hand over to Sergeant Lynd.

He lit a cigarette, drew on it. The smoke was harsh in his still laboring lungs. He threw it away and picked up the mike.

"Wash Nine, Wash Nine, this is M Four Two. Black. Black!"

"Check, M Four Two. All units stand by. What emergency, M Four Two?"

"I need the police, Wash Nine. I'm at . . ."



THE SOUND OF SCREAMING

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THE KIDNAPING KIT

"Get the dough up,"
the voice said. "Or —
would you rather die?"

by **GARY PAULSEN**

JIM WRIGHT sat in his car, the Denver sun working against the side of his face, and considered the note carefully. It was a singular missive.

Bob:

The money is in a briefcase on Tabletop Mountain. Get it this afternoon.

It wasn't signed, and it most certainly wasn't meant for him, and only curiosity kept him from throwing it away immediately. Curiosity because you just don't come out of giving a lecture in the Press Club every morning and find a note ad-

dressed to somebody else jammed in the horn ring of your steering wheel.

A note about money. Perhaps quite a lot of money, although that didn't matter too much because Jim Wright was in his own right—sometimes a rather unscrupulous kind of right—a multimillionaire.

"Yes," he told the reporters at the Press Club, "I raid corporations, crash companies, wipe out two or three thousand jobs at a time. I do it to make money. But that, after all, is the name of the game, isn't it?"

The note could be one of two things. A prank, though most of Wright's associates—he had few real friends—weren't the type to play jokes especially not on him. Or it could be a genuine mistake. His car looked like somebody else's, perhaps. And if it was a mistake it was right up his alley. He capitalized on others' mistakes.

At any rate it was only a ten-minute drive to the summit of Tabletop. He had over two hours before finalizing the deal with Anson Winston, owner of a competitive firm Jim Wright was taking over and closing down.

Might as well whip out there and see if there was a briefcase.

Just out of curiosity, if nothing else.

At the end of a block a portly man in a black Cadillac put down a pair of binoculars and smiled.

"He took it, I think," he said to

a thin, younger man sitting next to him. "Like a fish, beautiful. I tell you, the easiest man to sucker is a man who doesn't think he's a sucker. You just can't miss—remember that, Richards."

The thin man returned the smile. "I will, Chief, I most certainly will."

Even in the winter it is usually warmer on Tabletop. In the summer it is unbearably hot and windy, the main reason people don't go up unless it's night and they're in the back seat of a car.

Nor is the winding road to the top suitable for a Chrysler. By the time Jim Wright had maneuvered around rocks and ruts and parked the car he was just short of explosively irritated. And it didn't help when near the summit a huge boulder had fallen across the road, making him walk the last hundred yards in the stifling heat.

He almost didn't, finally changed his mind and got out. After five minutes of searching he was gratified to see a briefcase on top of a small rock.

Always direct, blunt, he approached the case and picked it up. Attached to the handle was a courier type handcuff, the kind used to cuff important papers to a diplomat's wrist. He was fingering it, wondering if the case could conceivably be booby trapped when the voice came.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wright. You have just been kidnapped."

The voice had come from the briefcase—flat, nasal, entirely with-

out emotion or intonation, as though being read. Jim Wright put the case down slowly, stood again.

"Who is this? What is this, a gag?" He wheeled, studying the small flat mesa. Aside from a clump of boulders about two hundred feet away there was nothing. "If so, I don't appreciate the humor."

"I assure you, Mr. Wright, it is no joke. You have indeed been kidnapped. From now on do no talking. Six feet to your left there is a rusty tin can. Watch it."

There was a sharp crack, an iron whip sound and the can jumped away, hit exactly in the center by a very small, very high velocity bullet. The sound came from the clump of boulders.

"You see, Mr. Wright," the voice picked up, "it is not a joke. Or if you still think it is, shake your head. Another demonstration could be arranged. Perhaps a crease on your shoulder, or your earlobe, which, incidentally, I could hit easily.

"I'm studying you through a twelve-power telescope which is mounted on the rifle. It is powerful enough for me to see that mole by your left eye. If you move fast or try to run I will kill you by shooting you in that eye. Do you understand? If so, nod."

It was, of course, preposterous. Wright almost smiled. You can't just have this happening to you, he thought. I mean I can't be on this mountain in this predicament, not

really. He started to turn away.

Another crack. He could feel a ripping wind by his cheek.

"Don't be stupid, Mr. Wright. I could as easily have killed you. Next time I will. Now do as I say — exactly as I say. Pick up the briefcase and put the cuff, tightly, on your wrist."

Jim Wright studied the rocks. He could see only a tiny fleck of light flashing on what he assumed was the telescope.

"Do it now," the voice commanded.

To Wright's credit, he knew when his position was bad. On the rare occasions when he lost in a business deal — very rare — he didn't haggle or whine but dropped out immediately. He now bent and picked up the briefcase, clicking the handcuff until it almost clamped his skin.

"Fine. Now hold it up so I can see if it's tight. Turn it a little. Yes. Fine. Now open the briefcase and once it's wide open pull the little side panel out."

Jim Wright did so.

"Good. In that side compartment you will find the following items. Three cheap plastic walkie-talkies and three sticks of dynamite. One walkie-talkie is permanently on send, so that you can talk to me. The second is on receive, on which I'm talking to you. And the third has been altered and wired to the dynamite. It is on a different frequency. Should a transmitter of that frequency be triggered within three

miles a small relay will close and the dynamite will detonate. As I said, Mr. Wright, you have been kidnaped."

"You can't —" Wright stared at the dynamite. "I mean, you aren't serious."

"Do you know what would happen to you if those three sticks went off? Just one stick would most certainly kill you. Three would turn you to atoms. Now close the side panel and listen."

Jim Wright listened, real fear coming down for the first time. The dynamite had looked lethal, impersonally deadly. And the flatness of the voice, the coldness — he almost shivered.

"You will get in your car. You will drive to your bank and draw out two hundred thousand dollars in used twenties and fifties. You will put the money in the briefcase and you will come right back here for further instructions. Do you understand?"

Jim Wright nodded.

"A man will be following you somewhere within three miles. If he hears you saying anything wrong — and let me tell you now that the walkie-talkie on send is turned full volume so high that even a whisper will come through — if he hears *nothing* out of hand he will trigger his transmitter and you will be powerless. Nor will we be caught. Nothing in that briefcase is traceable to us. Do you understand? A further note: you will be observed in the bank.



Don't try anything fancy like a note. Now go. You have one hour, no more, at which time the dynamite will be detonated regardless. So remember that little thing."

Carrying the briefcase, it was very hard for Wright not to tiptoe his way to the car.

On the way to town, driving with difficulty because of the handcuff, Wright had plenty of time to think, and it all came up bad. He didn't believe they would go to all that trouble if they didn't mean it. And that put him in the unenviable position of, in a way, actually having kidnaped himself.

Since he didn't want to die, he would get the money. But worse than that — he could, after all, afford to spend two hundred thousand without hurting a great deal — he couldn't report it. They were off scot-free. If it ever got out that he, Big Jim Wright, shark and raider

of corporations, had been bamboozled so neatly his career wouldn't be worth ten cents.

Later — when he'd brought the money back to Tabletop and had been directed where to go to get the key to the cuff — another small mountain on the other side of Denver. There another out-of-sight man with a gun was thorough enough to make him leave the note from the car, so he had no evidence whatsoever. He actually admired them.

"Of course it's not possible," he said to the third man. "But if we were to work together we could probably own every business in the country in ten years."

"You're right," the voice answered. "It's not possible."

Jim Wright came down on Winston with a particular vengeance, subconsciously trying to make up for the kidnapping.

"I have your company," he said coldly, "and I'm going to close it down."

Mr. Winston sighed, his weight moving up and down like the tide. "You realize, of course, that if this company were to close down, almost a thousand employees would be out of work — families, children, all of it."

"That's on your conscience," Jim Wright said shortly. "I loaned you the money, or my bank did. One hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars against fifty-one percent of

the stock. Your share. The note is due now. If you were so worried about your employees you should have gotten the money up to pay me."

"I did," Winston interrupted. He pushed an envelope across the table. "A certified check, made out to you. Now please leave. My assistant Richards and I have work to do. We've got a good many loose ends to clean up."

Jim Wright opened the envelope and looked at the check. He stood. Just before the door he turned and smiled, a genuine smile. "I don't suppose you'd tell me how you knew I wouldn't call your hand."

"Pardon?"

"— or tell me what you intend doing with the other twenty-five thousand?"

Winston said nothing.

"No, I didn't think you would. I could make a stink, you know. Make you prove to the police where you got the money, but I expect you've got that covered. Had everything covered. Neat. Beautiful." He turned and left, not slamming the door.

Richards coughed. "He has a point. What are we going to do with the other twenty-five thousand?"

Winston allowed a tiny smile to creep out. "Why, put it in the employees' relief fund, of course. What else?"

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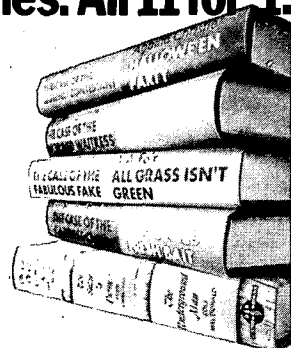
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